Why we gossip

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A functional perspective on the self-relevance of gossip for senders, receivers and targets

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Publisher: University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Printed by: Ipskamp, B.V., Enschede, The Netherlands

ISBN: 978-90-367-9846-4 (printed book)

ISBN: 978-90-367-9845-7 (e-book)

rijksuniversiteit groningen

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PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the
University of Groningen
on the authority of the
Rector Magnificus Prof. E. Sterken
and in accordance with
the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Monday, 19th of June 2017 at 16:15 hours

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Chapter 1

General Introduction

Gossip is one of the most ubiquitous human behaviors. Researchers have documented gossip across cultures, societies, types of groups and domains of activity, and estimated that people spend more than two thirds of their conversation time gossiping (Dunbar, Duncan & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994). Some claim that human society, as we know it, cannot exist without gossip (e.g. Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994). And indeed, people who do not gossip may be socially disengaged or alienated (Rosnow, 2001).

Although exchanging gossip is an omnipresent behavior which is not intrinsically good or bad, gossiping has a strong negative reputation[1]. Compared to other socially disapproved organizational behaviors, such as deceptive sales practices, or misuse of organizational resources (MacLean, Anteby, Hudson, & Rudolph, 2006), gossip is more ambiguous in its manifestation and implications. Because virtually everybody engages in gossip in a broad range of circumstances, and anyone may be affected by it, gossip cannot be understood only as counterproductive behavior. Thus, on the one hand, gossip is a widespread behavior which is not per se positive or negative; on the other hand, gossip is considered socially undesirable and it is explicitly disapproved (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004).

This paradox suggests that gossip entails a complex exchange of information, highly relevant and functional for those who engage in it, or are concerned by it. As such, people may be interested in or may frown upon gossip for different reasons, which possibly depend on how the gossip relates to them personally. The individuals involved in gossip are likely to have a unique perspective on the gossip exchange, shaped by their specific role in the gossip process. Therefore, in this dissertation we will investigate what functions gossip fulfills from the perspectives of the individuals involved in it: the sender, the receiver, and the target of

[1] The content of gossip can be positive or negative; however, the gossip content is distinguishable from the act of gossiping (see definition and characteristics on pp. 5-12).

gossip. Understanding the functions gossip has for each of the individuals involved may clarify the gossip paradox: the fact that gossip is prevalent across human communities, but it is generally disapproved.

We investigate the functions of gossip for senders, receivers, and targets in a workplace context, for three reasons. First, the workplace is ideal for the study of gossip, because it is a complex social environment, where individuals have frequent interactions with others. Second, people spend a significant amount of time at work, and organizational life is of major importance for individuals' well-being (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005). Third, understanding workplace gossip may help organizations optimize interpersonal processes and may ultimately help organizations to achieve their goals.

In the remainder of this introduction, we will first define gossip and describe its characteristics. Next, we will review gossip's most important functions, and discuss how they are addressed in the two main research traditions investigating gossip, which focus on groups and on individuals. Afterwards, we will outline current research studying gossip at the individual level, and discuss gossip's functions for people who are senders, receivers and targets. We will end the introduction with an overview of the studies in this dissertation.

Gossip definition and characteristics

The most widely accepted definition of gossip is *evaluative talk exchanged informally about an absent third party* (e.g. Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). Because humans are social beings, who need to rely on each other and exchange socially valued information in order to survive and thrive, gossip is considered fundamental to human functioning or even hard-wired into human nature (Emler, 1994; Rosnow, 2001): "because gossip saved lives in the Stone Age, it will be with organizations forever" (Nicholson, 1998, p. 141). Evolutionary theory describes gossip as the reason why humans have developed language: to function optimally in complex social environments (e.g. Dunbar, 2004). Because it is impossible to directly observe

the behavior of all group members, people need to share reputational information about others, evaluate their trustworthiness and quality as exchange partners, and to exert social control over uncooperative group members (Dunbar, 2004; Giardini & Conte, 2011; Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2015; 2016). Gossip has some important characteristics, which distinguish it from other forms of communication.

The gossip triad. Gossip involves minimally three people: a gossip sender – the person who sends the gossip message, a gossip receiver – the person to whom the gossip is addressed, and a gossip target – the person whom the gossip is about. The sender and receiver typically exchange gossip in face-to-face interactions, about a target who is not present (or does not hear the conversation). Figure 1.1 depicts the gossip triad. The three individuals in the gossip triad usually know each other personally, or at least share social network connections, and are prone to meet in the future (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012c; Emler, 1994). Although people may also be interested in reading about the lives of famous people in gossip magazines, we consider celebrity gossip beyond the scope of the current dissertation, in line with Noon and Delbridge's definition of gossip: "the information must be about the members of the setting" (1993. p. 25). Previous research showed that a trust relation between sender and receiver makes gossip more likely, whereas the relation of gossip sender or receiver with the target is a less important predictor of gossip (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012a; Wittek & Wielers, 1998).

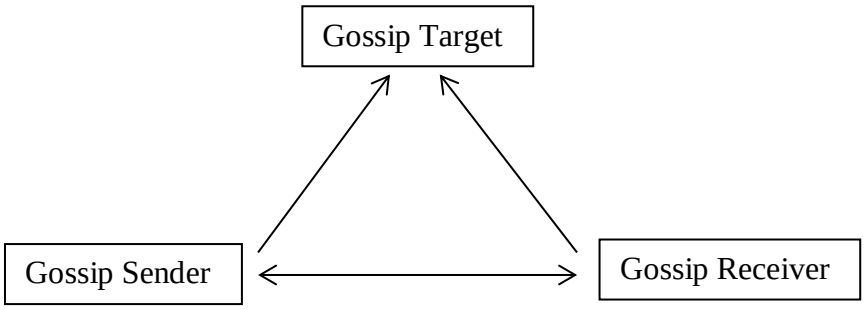

Figure 1.1. The gossip triad.

Evaluative. Although most people associate gossip exclusively with negative information about others, possibly because negative information is more memorable (e.g. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), the evaluative content of gossip can be negative or positive (Ben Ze'ev, 1994; Foster, 2004). The evaluation communicated through gossip may be of negative or positive valence, because gossip essentially reflects opinions about others in one's social environment, which are largely based on negative or positive perceptions of targets' behavior, characteristics, previous impressions of the target, or role expectations that targets fulfill or not. Furthermore, the positivity and negativity of gossip can vary, but gossip is never purely descriptive: gossip always contains an evaluative component, which can be explicit or implicit (Bergmann, 1993). For example, negative gossip may come in the form of factual or descriptive information (e.g. *"Lisa avoided celebrating her birthday at work"*), or as a judgmental message, resembling character assassination, a type of gossip that disqualifies targets as worthy members of the group (e.g. *"Lisa showed antisocial behavior towards colleagues"*). In the current work, we use moderate evaluative statements to operationalize gossip, which are more typical instances of gossip than extreme evaluations, or we let participants describe gossip incidents that they remember.

Concealed. Gossip typically involves talking about people who are not present. Gossip is distinct from more direct forms of communication because it creates a safe space in which the gossipers can voice their opinions about someone without being interrupted or corrected, and with a reduced risk of retaliation from targets (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Because the target or other individuals are not included during the gossip exchange, people may spread more sensitive information, may speak more bluntly, or may be more inclined to distort facts than they would if targets were present. The targets' perspectives on the issues discussed are missing, which might facilitate polarization of opinions about targets.

Informal. An important characteristic of gossip is that it occurs in informal conversations. It is incidental, unplanned, spontaneous, and voluntary. The people who engage in gossip usually cannot make a priori predictions about the content or outcome of their conversation (Emler, 1994). Furthermore, most gossip occurs in face-to-face interactions, where speakers can monitor how the message is received and can flexibly adapt their behavior based on cues indicating whether the gossip is appreciated and encouraged, and whether the conversation partner is willing to disseminate the information or contribute novel points about the target. As such, the exchange of gossip is gradual and it contributes to establishing a safe environment where participants can speak freely (Ellwardt et al, 2012a).

Subjective. Gossip does not reflect facts as much as the opinion of the speaker about the target. Gossip is subjective because it contains evaluations, moral judgments, beliefs and attitudes related to the experience of organizational life, resulting from the gossiper's (and potentially the receiver's) interpretation of a social situation (Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010; Rosnow, 2001). Because gossip reflects a subjective perspective, its truthfulness can be only partially assessed. However, the impact of one inaccurate gossip message is limited, because people corroborate multiple gossip statements and their own observations about targets when assessing targets' reputation (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008). Furthermore, most gossip is intended to offer a truthful picture of the target, and is based on concrete events (Bergmann, 1993). People are not inclined to spread false gossip because they may face repercussions from the target or they may lose credibility with the receiver (Kuttler, Parker, & La Greca, 2002). Although its truthfulness cannot be established precisely, and gossipers might manipulate information for their own benefit, gossip remains very interesting for receivers, because it conveys important reputational information about group members (Burt, 2008).

Embedded in context. Gossip is unconditionally bound to concrete events, and essentially an idiographic understanding of reality (Bergmann, 1993). As such, gossip is defined by the situation in which it occurs: gossip's subtleties cannot be fully interpreted outside the specific circumstances that generated it, outside the relationships between the members of the gossip triad, their shared social meaning and history (Foster, 2004), or in isolation from other types of communication, such as formal organizational communication (Mills, 2010). The only constant in gossip is that it contains an evaluation about people (Rosnow, 2001).

Moreover, whether a message constitutes gossip or not is also dependent on context (Jaeger, Skelder, Rind, & Rosnow, 1994). Some researchers believe that there is nothing about the content of a sentence that classifies it as gossip, but rather the intention of the speaker (Cuonzo, 2008), how, when, where and with whom it is shared. Gossip is a complex behavior that may take many forms: it can involve facts or supposition, it can be communicated explicitly or implicitly through metaphors or other figures of speech, or even signaled through tone or body language (Rosnow, 2001). For example the sentence "*Lisa did not celebrate her birthday*" can be considered factual information when the budget for workplace events is reviewed, and gossip when the sociality of colleagues is discussed. Furthermore, the same sentence may be positive gossip in a context where colleague Lisa is appreciated for donating the event budget to help a colleague in need, or negative gossip when she is criticized for avoiding contact with the work-group.

General functions of gossip

Gossip is a ubiquitous behavior because it serves important functions for individuals and groups. Gossip's functions are interrelated and may come into play simultaneously, but separate categories can be distinguished: information, influence, social bonding, and emotion outlet (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Rosnow, 2001; Stirling, 1956).

The people involved in gossip may be unaware of the functions gossip has for them. The circulation of gossip may not always seem to have a conscious or explicit purpose (Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1994): "gossip may involve a torrent of talk, yet its most vital claims remain silent" (Spacks, 1985, p. 22). Moreover, the functions of gossip are not fixed, but they are activated by specific circumstances and contextual cues (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). For example when people experience high uncertainty in their work environment they may gossip in order to seek for information (Mills, 2010), whereas in competitive contexts people may engage in gossip to denigrate their rivals and emphasize their own qualities (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007).

Information. People use gossip to communicate information about others in their environment. This is important because gossip helps people learn from others' positive and negative experiences and adapt their own behavior. Furthermore, gossip contains reputational information, which helps people make better evaluations of others' trustworthiness or ability to perform well (Baumeister et al, 2004; Beersm & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg et al, 2012; Sommerfeld et al, 2007). According to Emler (1994), the fundamental purpose of gossip as social observation is to make reputational inquiries; it allows individuals and communities to accumulate behavioral evidence about others and to form and refine judgments about their vices and virtues. The wide dissemination of reputational information has advantages for both the community and for individuals, because it helps identify social loafers and high performers. Gossip represents a good learning tool, helping people decode others' self-presentation efforts, and understand "how life is lived behind the social mask" (Medini & Rosenberg, 1976, p. 462).

Influence. Gossip has a strong manipulative potential, shaping the way gossipers and receivers perceive and behave towards their targets (e.g. Beersm & Van Kleef, 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978). As a vector for transmission of social information, gossip influences

receivers, whether or not people have access to original information about a target (Sommerfeld et al, 2008). By sharing their perspectives with the receivers, gossip senders offer to the receivers their own representation of the target, and help nuance views about the target. People can use gossip to exert influence over both targets and receivers; speakers may directly manipulate the behavior of receivers by influencing the way they evaluate targets, and indirectly the behavior of targets, through the effect gossip may have on receivers. Because gossip takes place in private and in the absence of targets, and targets have no opportunity to intervene and change how they are portrayed, receivers are likely to agree with the gossipers' perspective (Eder & Enke, 1991). Gossip creates social consensus about gossip targets, may polarize opinions in favor or against targets, and in extreme cases it may lead to scapegoating or victimization (Ellwardt et al, 2012c; Georganta, Panagopoulou, & Montgomery, 2014). Furthermore, by providing information about targets, gossipers may help receivers compare themselves with the targets; thus, gossip is a potential way to influence how receivers evaluate themselves (Baumeister et al, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Social bonding. In the process of exchanging gossip, senders and receivers build a trust relation and an emotional bond. Some believe gossip is a mutual grooming mechanism among humans (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). Gossip is considered an effective way of making social alliances and finding new friends, because it helps people discover that they have similar likes or dislikes for targets, and that they may rely on each other in the future for resource sharing or emotional support (Bosson et al, 2006, Ellwardt, Wittek, & Wielers, 2012b). Furthermore, because negative gossip entails a degree of risk for the sender, the receiver may see negative gossip as an endowment of trust from the gossiper (Ellwardt et al, 2012a). Positive gossip may help cement social relations because it reaffirms values and cultural norms, and offers positive reinforcements to members of the social network.

Outlet for emotions. People are likely to exchange gossip in situations that are emotionally charged, because gossip can provide cathartic release from anger, guilt, anxiety, or other unpleasant internal states, and helps gossipers and receivers return to a state of emotional balance (e.g. Foster, 2004; Stirling, 1956; Feinberg et al, 2012). Venting negative emotions through gossip might be a way to de-escalate conflicts without a direct confrontation with others. Because it provides an outlet for emotions in a private and safe environment, gossip may help stabilize hierarchies or conflicts between individuals (Foster, 2004).

Gossip is functional for groups

Previous research has mostly focused on understanding gossip's functions within a group context (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012, Feinberg et al, 2012, Sommerfeld et al, 2007; 2008). The basic notion underlying this research is that gossip can serve as an adaptive behavior for group functioning, because it helps define group identity and it protects group welfare.

First, gossip has a social control function, because it involves sharing reputational information about the past behavior of group members and helps them evaluate their trustworthiness. It enables group members to keep track of their interaction partners' actions, which is especially valuable because people cannot observe all others' behavior personally (e.g. Dunbar, 2004; Wu et al, 2015; 2016). As such, gossip restricts and controls the ability of individuals to pursue self-interest. Because social loafers or people who do not share resources are easily identified, gossip serves as a policing device that secures the collaboration of group members, thus maintaining or increasing group performance (e.g. Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; 2012; Sommerfeld et al, 2007; 2008; Wu et al, 2015; 2016). Some studies show that merely the threat of becoming a gossip target has a powerful effect on people's collaboration decisions, because people fear reputation damaging gossip and

ostracism, and are pressured to behave more cooperatively (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Piazza & Bering, 2008).

Second, gossip helps groups communicate and enforce group morale, values, and norms, by providing concrete examples of how norms are applied to group members, and what consequences different behavioral choices may have for social actors (Baumeister et al, 2004; McAndrew et al, 2007). Gossip helps define and communicate social identity and group boundaries, by establishing who is and who is not seen as a group member, and what behaviors or attributes are expected of group members. Furthermore, because gossip is shared in private with trusted others, it is important for developing social bonds and emotional connections between members of the group. Gossip helps people visualize their group goals and common interests in relation to other, potentially rival groups.

Although gossip is socially disapproved, people are encouraged to gossip to warn others about a rule violation (Beersma and Van Kleef 2012). Moreover, failing to gossip when someone misbehaves can lead to negative interpersonal consequences, because it impedes groups from identifying and punishing free riders (Baumeister et al, 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012).

Is gossip functional for individuals?

Although gossip is considered to be functional for groups, gossip's role for individuals is not very well understood by current research. As an activity between individuals, gossip is often seen as cheap and trivial, talk about unimportant things, a superficial activity that appeals only to shallow minds, and is regarded (at best) as a waste of time (Emler, 1994). We believe that this negative view on the meaning of gossip for individuals is not constructive, because gossip has multiple functions at both the individual and the group level (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Gossip cannot play an essential role for groups without having any

meaningful function for individuals, because individuals are the ones who exchange gossip, and the ones whom gossip is about.

Bergmann (1993) notes that there is a pseudo-conflict in the study of gossip between its social and individual functions, whereas the two perspectives are complementary: gossip has latent functions for group preservation, and manifest functions at the level of the individuals involved in gossip. As research has predominantly focused on examining the social-control functions of gossip in groups (Beersma & Van Kleef 2011; 2012, Feinberg et al, 2012, Sommerfeld et al, 2007; 2008, Wu et al, 2015; 2016), examination of the role of gossip for individuals is still in its infancy. Each individual, however, "brings to gossip his own interest and needs" (Nevo et al., 1994, p.181). As such, each of the three stakeholders in the gossip triad is likely to have a distinct perspective on the gossip process, with causes and implications defined by their unique place in the triad.

Functions of gossip for the gossip sender. The gossip sender plays the active role in the communication of gossip: this person initiates and often defines how the gossip interaction takes place. We believe that gossip has a clear functional role for the sender, because personal motives, interests and needs are likely to shape the gossip that is shared (Nevo et al., 1994). Only a few empirical studies have outlined some of the functions gossip may fulfill for senders, and most of these studies focused on outlining the group-serving functions of gossip.

The most prominent direction shows that people engage in gossip to exert influence, by protecting their group from social loafers and reinforcing group norms (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg et al, 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). People also gossip to influence others for selfish reasons, as shown by one study where gossipers self-enhanced by denigrating competitors or sexual rivals (Massar, Buunk, & Rempt, 2012).

Some studies offer evidence for the information function of gossip: managers who were doing business transactions were more likely to gossip when they had to solve a severe

problem (Rooks, Tazelaar, & Snijders, 2011). In a qualitative study, researchers discovered that employees' need for information motivated them to gossip in order to make sense of their experience in the workplace and learn about their group (Kelly, 1985).

Furthermore, a few studies showed that people engage in gossip to seek emotional support and to bond with others (Bosson et al, 2006; Ellwardt et al, 2012a; Grosser et al, 2010; Wittek & Wielers, 1998), especially when they experience psychological contract violations and abusive supervision, and when they have low trust and infrequent contact with managers (Ellwardt et al, 2012b; Kuo et al, 2015).

Although previous research provides some evidence that gossip is functional for senders, it is focused on emphasizing how people use gossip to improve group functioning. No study offers a unitary perspective on the most important functions of gossip for senders, and their associated mechanisms for the individuals who spread the gossip.

Such a unified perspective can be offered by self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2002). According to SDT, some of the strongest needs humans experience in the workplace are the need to feel competent and in control of their work environment, the need to behave autonomously, and the need to have supportive social relations with others (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Gossip may help fulfill these needs, because it offers individuals an opportunity to gain information about their work context, to influence others, and to bond with others. This perspective would suggest that gossip is more prevalent among those who experience these fundamental needs more strongly, which will crucially depend on the level of one's social power.

Thus, people who have lower power may feel less competent, less autonomous, and more in need of social support, because they depend on others with higher power to access resources. In consequence, low-power people may experience reduced control over their outcomes and environment, and a higher need to bond with others they may rely on in the

future (Case, Conlon, & Maner, 2015). Because people are likely to spread gossip in a way that addresses their specific needs and brings some personal benefit to them (Nevo et al, 1994), we investigate whether low-power people gossip more, and use gossip to gain informal access to information and influence, and to bond with others. Thus, we propose that gossip is functional in addressing senders' needs.

Functions of gossip for the gossip receiver. The gossip receiver has a more passive role in the communication of gossip, and may or may not solicit gossip. From the receivers' perspective, previous research has mostly outlined the group-serving functions of gossip: people choose to collaborate or exclude others based on gossip they know about them (e.g. Burt, 2008; Sommerfeld et al, 2007). People are interested in gossip about others especially if they are of the same age and gender, because they are one's social rivals (McAndrew et al, 2007); individuals need to monitor and compare themselves with others in their network with whom they may compete for the limited resources of their group. Although some researchers described gossip as a social comparison mechanism (Baumeister et al, 2004; Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004), it is not yet clear what specific functions gossip has for its receivers. Gossip about other people is likely to be personally relevant for receivers, because gossip contains information about one's immediate social environment, and it potentially enables receivers to learn about themselves from social comparisons with gossip targets (Baumeister et al, 2004; Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

However, we know little about how people make social comparisons between themselves and gossip targets, and how they react to the information they draw from these comparisons. Because people experience strong emotions when they receive stimuli relevant to the self, receiving gossip is likely to generate self-evaluative emotions. As such, we propose that gossip is functional in helping receivers self-evaluate through social comparisons with targets, and that gossip generates emotions which may drive specific behaviors.

Functions of gossip for the gossip target. Gossip sometimes reaches its targets, although this is rarely the intention of the sender. Although most gossip is spread with benign intentions, gossip stories can threaten or damage targets' reputations and their relationships to others (Rosnow, 2001). Because people have no control over gossip about themselves, gossip implies a degree of threat for targets regardless of what is specifically said: "the third-person pronoun is a wicked pronoun: it is the pronoun of the nonperson, it absents, it annuls" (Barthes, 1978, pp. 185). Previous research, focusing on social functions of gossip, shows that people are more prosocial when others are likely to gossip about them and when their group contributions are visible to others (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Piazza & Bering, 2008), because people are concerned about their reputation, especially when they expect to interact with their group members in the future (Wu et al, 2015; 2016).

However, previous research offers limited insights about the functions of gossip for its targets, and their individual response mechanisms. Because gossip is directly relevant to them, targets are likely to have a complex emotional experience when gossip reaches them. On the one hand, gossip provides targets with blunt evaluations about the self, which may influence their self-views. On the other hand, because gossipers communicate reputational information about the targets' self, and may influence the way others see and interact with targets, gossip targets are likely to react towards the gossiper.

Current research has not yet investigated what are the response mechanisms for individual gossip targets, and what behavioral consequences are to be expected from targets. Because gossip is directly self-relevant for targets and it shapes their reputation, hearing gossip about the self is likely to generate strong emotional responses directed at the self and at the gossiper. As such, because the gossip message is of critical importance for its targets, we propose that when gossip reaches its targets it has primarily an emotional impact, which generates specific behavioral responses.

Aim and outline of the thesis

Aim of the thesis

Although individual members of groups are the ones who spread, receive and are targets of gossip, research has investigated almost exclusively the role of gossip in group functioning. Little systematic research has focused on the individual perspectives of the actors in the gossip triad, and on the functions gossip fulfills for individuals. Because gossip is a behavior that takes place between individuals, and it primarily concerns individuals, it is important to understand the role of gossip from the unique perspectives of the sender, receiver, and target of gossip. Therefore, the purpose of our work is to examine and clarify the functions and implications of gossip from the individual standpoints of the gossip triad actors, and to offer the first account of gossip that considers all three perspectives.

Outline of the thesis

In chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this dissertation we present a series of empirical quantitative studies designed to investigate the functions associated with the spreading and receiving of gossip by its intended receivers and by its targets. For gossip senders and receivers, who are voluntary participants of gossip, we examine gossip's motives and functions; for receivers and targets, who learn reputational information that is relevant for the self (indirectly through social comparison for receivers, or directly through its evaluative content for targets), we examine gossip as an emotion generating process. Throughout the following chapters we employ different methods (scenario studies, critical incident studies, laboratory experiments), use different samples (Dutch students, Dutch employees, US employees), and use different psychological theories in conceptualizing the perspectives of gossip sender, receiver and target.

Chapter 2: The gossip sender. In chapter 2 we combine theories on gossip and social power (e.g., Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) to examine

whether people who have low and high power share gossip strategically when it is functional for them. Because people who have lower power depend on others with higher power to access resources, lower power people experience specific needs and threats that have to be addressed without exercising formal power. Specifically, gossip is a strategy that lower power people may use to better understand and control their work environment and to form alliances that may help them thrive. Thus, we propose that low power people spread more gossip than high power people. Second, as social power can only be defined in relation to others, we argue that the relative power of the person receiving the gossip may influence gossiper's engagement in gossiping behavior. Low-power individuals are inclined to attend carefully to the actions of high-power individuals in order to predict and influence their behavior towards them, whereas powerful people pay less attention to lower-power individuals (Keltner, et al, 2003; Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Magee & Smith, 2013). Therefore, we propose that individuals are less interested in gossiping downwardly towards less powerful receivers, and more interested in gossiping laterally and upwardly (with equally or more powerful receivers). Third, we propose that effects of social power on gossiping can be clarified by the motives to access information, to influence and to bond with the receiver, suggesting that gossip is a valuable informational resource that is shared strategically when it is functional for the gossiper.

Chapter 3: The gossip receiver. In chapter 3 we investigate whether receiving competence-related gossip about others helps individuals self-evaluate. Gossip receivers are likely to make social comparisons between themselves and gossip targets (Wert & Salovey, 2004). According to the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician (SCENT) model, people are motivated to draw conclusions about the self in ways that help them maintain a favorable self-view by improving, promoting or protecting the self (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Thus, we propose that individuals use evaluative information about others (i.e., gossip) to improve,

promote, and protect themselves. Specifically, we expect that positive gossip has higher self-improvement value than negative gossip, whereas negative gossip has higher self-promotion value and raises higher self-protection concerns than positive gossip. Furthermore, we investigate whether people who hear negative gossip feel pride due to the self-promotion value of negative gossip about others, and fear due to the self-protection value of negative gossip.

Chapter 4: The gossip target. In chapter 4 we investigate the emotions and behavioral intentions of people who hear performance-related gossip about themselves in the workplace. Receiving gossip about the self may generate complex responses, because, on the one hand, gossip contains evaluations that are directly relevant for targets' self-evaluation, and on the other hand it contains reputational information which affects how others evaluate the target. As such, we use cognitive appraisal theory (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus; 1991, Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) to capture the two response directions that are likely for targets: self-directed and other-directed. We expect that targets of positive gossip feel happy with themselves and happy with the gossiper, and that targets of negative gossip experience self-directed blame and other-directed blame. Furthermore, we expect positive and negative emotional reactions directed at the self and at others to have specific behavioral consequences (repair, retaliation and affiliation).

Chapter 5: General discussion. In chapter 5 we provide an overview of our findings. We discuss the findings and reflect on their theoretical and practical implications, and we also discuss limitations of our current work, as well as avenues for future research.

Chapter 2

Gossip is the weapon of the weak. How power differences shape gossip behavior

Abstract

Gossip entails spreading evaluative information about people who are not present. In two studies, we examined how power differences between individuals shape negative and positive gossip in organizations. The results of an experimental study (N = 128) showed that participants assigned to a low power condition gossiped more than participants assigned to a high power condition. In a scenario study (N = 276) we independently manipulated the power of the gossip sender and receiver, and found that low power people gossiped regardless of receivers' power level, whereas high power people gossiped less towards low power receivers than towards high power receivers. These effects were mediated by the motives to access information, to influence and to bond with the receiver, suggesting that gossip is a valuable resource that is shared strategically when it is beneficial for the individual.

Chapter 2: Gossip is the weapon of the weak

Introduction

"Great people talk about ideas, average people talk about things, and small people talk about other people" is a quote most often attributed to Elanor Roosevelt (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Eleanor_Roosevelt). Roosevelt moralizes gossip, and also alludes to the common assumption that the powerless gossip more than the powerful (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009). Gossip is often considered to be the "weapon of the weak", because it can mobilize resistance to formal changes and other organizational projects, and may threaten managerial decisions and disrupt organizational processes, without openly confronting others (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009). Some anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that indeed people in typical low power positions, such as secretaries or subordinates (as compared to their managers), and students (as compared to their professors), have a reputation for gossiping (Bergmann, 1993, Scott, 1985; Wert & Salovey, 2004). However, the relation between power and gossip behavior has not been systematically examined by previous research, and we currently know little about the mechanisms that drive effects of power on gossip behavior.

Gossip, or informally exchanging evaluative information about others who are not present, may express *positive* and *negative* facts and opinions about targets (Foster, 2004). Because gossip is generally considered unproductive or harmful behavior, people tend to disapprove of all gossip, and in organizations managers are the least likely to favor it (van Iterson & Clegg, 2008). However, documented across cultures and contexts, gossip is a universal human behavior, intrinsic to social and organizational life (Dunbar, 2004), thereby serving important functions for individuals (Fine & Rosnow, 1978). First, positive and negative gossip help people learn about their social environment, reducing uncertainty about formal processes and structures (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Second, individuals use positive and negative gossip to influence others by communicating norms and identifying

those who cooperate or not, and by enabling gossipers to self-enhance relative to their targets (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011, Feinberg Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Third, engaging in positive and negative gossip helps people develop social bonds and trust relationships (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006; Rosnow, 2001).

Although gossip has adaptive value for all individuals, we propose that gossip may be more functional for less powerful than for more powerful people in gaining *information*, exerting *influence*, or *bonding* with others. Because a power relation implies the perceived asymmetrical dependence of the powerless on the powerful to obtain rewards and avoid punishments (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), lower power people experience specific needs and threats that have to be addressed in a way that cannot be fulfilled by exercising power. Gossip is an accessible behavior, available to most people, that may provide the less powerful with information, influence over others, and social connections. Furthermore, because high power people focus on opportunities and rewards, and attend more to others who can be instrumentally useful (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), they may engage in gossip, but preferably with people of equal or higher power rather than with lower power people. Downward gossip (towards less powerful receivers) may have less value for providing information, gaining influence or forming advantageous bonds with others; therefore, gossiping downwards may be unrewarding or even harmful.

In this contribution, we address the question of whether and how social power relates to spreading gossip. To answer this question, we first integrate the research literature on gossip and social power to argue that lower power people experience reduced autonomy and control in performing their job (e.g., Anderson & Brion, 2014; Keltner et al, 2003), which motivates them to engage in gossiping. Thus, we propose that low power people spread more gossip than high power people. Second, as social power can only be defined in relation to

others, we argue that the relative power of the person receiving the gossip may influence engagement in gossiping behavior. Therefore we propose that individuals are less interested in gossiping downwards and more interested in gossiping laterally and upwards (with equally or more powerful receivers). Third, as gossip is functional for people in gaining information (Baumeister et al, 2004), exerting influence (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011, Feinberg et al, 2012, Sommerfeld et al, 2008, Wert & Salovey, 2004), and bonding with others (Bosson et al, 2006), we propose that effects of social power on gossiping can be clarified by the motives to access information, to influence and to bond with the receiver, suggesting that gossip is a valuable resource that is shared strategically when it is functional for the gossiper.

Theoretical background

Power and gossip

Power represents the asymmetrical control over valued resources in the context of social relations (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007), granting the more powerful influence over others (French & Raven, 1959; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). Power is inherently relational, because lower power individuals depend on higher power individuals to obtain rewards and avoid punishments (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Emerson, 1962), thereby putting the powerless in a state of asymmetrical dependence on the powerful (Keltner et al, 2003; Galinsky et al, 2008). Moreover, power is a relative construct, in the sense that people may have different power relations with different individuals (e.g. supervisors may have high power in relation to subordinates, but are powerless in relation to their superiors), and may experience specific needs and display specific behaviors that are activated by the power relation.

Because powerless individuals have reduced access to valuable resources, they experience reduced autonomy and control over their environment and outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2002, Case, Conlon, & Maner, 2015), which decreases their effectiveness, morale and

job satisfaction, and makes them vulnerable to unfair treatment (Keltner et al, 2003). Compared to the powerful, the powerless experience higher social and material threats, are more concerned with potential hazards and constraints, and less optimistic about obtaining rewards (Anderson & Galinsky; 2006 Keltner et al., 2003). Therefore, reduced power signals that one's fundamental needs are not optimally fulfilled, which motivates powerless people to cope with the disadvantages or threats associated with their power level.

Because less powerful individuals cannot address their needs by exercising power, they may do so through informal means, such as gossip. Gossip is exchanged in the target's absence, between people who are assumed trustworthy (Ellwardt, Wittek, & Wielers, 2012b), and it is an easy and accessible strategy to work towards desired outcomes: seeking information, influencing receivers' opinions in a desired way, and building a network that can offer support. In contrast, because high power individuals have more formal ways to exercise influence and control (e.g. Keltner et al, 2003; Galinsky et al, 2008), they depend less on informal means of gaining information and control and have a lower need to build support networks through gossip. Therefore, we expect that low power people spread more gossip than high power people (hypothesis 1a). Importantly, we expect similar patterns for both positive and negative gossip, because both types of gossip can be useful in obtaining information, exerting influence and befriending others. Although positive gossip is socially accepted, and is spread freely in the social network, whereas negative gossip is more restricted because it is socially undesirable and entails some risk for the gossiper (Ellwardt et al, 2012b; Wert & Salovey, 2004), we propose that they have similar functions in regulating power differences. As such, positive and negative gossip can be used by lower power people to address their specific needs: to better understand and control their social environment and to form alliances that may help them thrive.

Furthermore, we propose that the relationship between social power and gossiping behavior depends on the power of the person receiving the gossip. According to research on social power, powerful people pay less attention to lower power individuals than vice-versa (Magee & Smith, 2013). Because high power people can exert formal control over valuable resources, they can afford to remain relatively unaware of the perspectives and actions of low-power individuals. However, low-power individuals are dependent on high-power individuals for obtaining rewards and avoiding punishments. Consequently, they attend carefully to high-power individuals to understand and predict their behavior by soliciting information, by influencing and bonding with them (Keltner, et al, 2003). Therefore, individuals may prefer to gossip with partners who are equally or more powerful than themselves, whereas they may be less interested in gossiping towards less powerful people, because downward gossiping is not very functional or may even be harmful. Formally stated, we expect that the power of receiver moderates the negative effect of power on gossip, such that the negative relation between gossiper's power and gossip behavior is stronger for low power receivers than for high power receivers (hypothesis 1b).

Gossip motives

Gossip is a universal human behavior that serves particular functions for individuals (Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Specifically, people can use gossip to inform one another about critical affairs in their social environment (Baumeister et al, 2004), to influence others' impressions about themselves and the gossip targets (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011, Feinberg et al, 2012), and to develop social bonds and trust relationships (Bosson et al, 2006). We propose that these motives of exchanging information, exerting influence, and bonding with others operate as explanatory mechanisms that link social power to gossip behavior.

Information. To function efficiently in a complex social environment, like the modern workplace, individuals require information about people and events around them

(Foster, 2004). Because leaders usually communicate decisions and policies from higher to lower levels in the organizational hierarchy, employees in lower power positions are the least likely to be fully informed about management actions, and are prone to experience uncertainty and threat (Wert & Salovey, 2004). As such, lower-power individuals may have a greater desire to seek information via the grapevine compared to higher-power individuals (Mills, 2010).

In order to reduce uncertainty about formal processes and norms, people often supplement incomplete information with news obtained informally through gossip, an accessible and low cost source of information (Baumeister et al, 2004). Gossip is a way of decoding other people's self-presentation efforts, true intentions, and trustworthiness (Mills, 2010). Gossipers exchange information to compare their observations and opinions and form a more accurate impression of the target (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Furthermore, by evoking social comparisons, gossip helps people learn from others' success and failure stories, understand what is expected of them, and what is the cost of misbehavior (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2014; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

In addition, the "corporate culture" in an organization is commonly expressed in gossip stories (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). For low power employees gossip is crucial, especially during organizational entry and organizational change, because it can provide information that clarifies rules, expectations, and ways of working, reduces role conflict, and provides a framework for interpreting feedback (Miller & Jablin, 1991). As a mechanism of observational learning (Baumeister et al, 2004), gossip may be more valuable for lower power individuals than for higher power individuals, because it enables the powerless to understand and interact with their social environment and acquire knowledge about the goals, values, and norms that are set by the powerful. Therefore we predict that the relation between gossiper power and gossip behavior is mediated by the information motive,

such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to seek information (hypothesis 2a).

Because the powerful are likely to objectify others and see them as instrumental in their goal pursuits, they approach and attend selectively to people who can help them achieve their goals (Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). The powerful tend to rely on stereotypes and ignore others' perspectives and emotions (especially for people who are not instrumentally useful), whereas low power people use identifying information about others (Keltner, et al, 2003). As such, lower-power people may have little insights to offer the powerful beyond contributions prescribed by their role, and are less likely to be chosen as gossip partners. Therefore, we expect a moderated mediation pattern, such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to seek information, and this effect is stronger for low power receivers than for high power receivers (hypothesis 2b). Furthermore, because gossip is effective in conveying information that helps people understand their environment, regardless of whether it presents the target favorably or unfavorably (Baumeister et al, 2004), we expect this pattern for both positive and negative gossip.

Influence. Gossip gives people the opportunity to pass on positive and negative information about organizational members, with the potential to influence attitudes, opinions and decisions. Because gossip is exchanged informally and in private, it may be an important means for people who lack formal power over others to exert influence and achieve desired outcomes (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). People talk to others when they think they can influence or change opinions (Festinger, 1948), and the more people gossip, the more informal influence they have in the eyes of colleagues (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). Gossipers try to ensure that their own interpretation of the situation prevails (Paine, 1967), because gossip communicates one-sided opinions and constrains recipients to support the

point of the gossiper without challenge (Eder & Enke, 1991). There are several ways in which people can influence others through gossip and promote their worldview.

First, gossipers exert social control by pressuring others in their network who pursue selfish interests to respect the group norms, or by praising high performers (Baumeister et al, 2004, Dunbar, 2004, Feinberg et al, 2012). Furthermore, gossip enables people who lack formal control to oppose or support others indirectly by harming or boosting their reputation (e.g. Wert & Salovey, 2004, Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2015; 2016). Second, gossip may give people a degree of control over their work situation (Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Employees who experience reduced control due to the hierarchical nature of organizations may challenge managerial prerogatives and undermine their actions through gossip (Ellwardt, et al, 2012b; Sommerfeld et al, 2008). Third, people may exploit accumulated information to influence others for self-enhancement (Dunbar, 2004, McAndrew, Bell & Garcia, 2007; Rosnow, 2001). Because negative gossip gives people coercive power over recipients, and positive gossip gives them reward power (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), evaluating others is a way of presenting oneself to others as a qualified judge (Amabile, 1983), which may increase one's status and power (Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Subjectively, gossipers boost their self-esteem or protect their self-image by making downward social comparisons with rivals, and upward comparisons with desirable allies (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Because they have reduced authority and control over others, gossip might be more instrumental to lower power people than it is to higher power people for influencing others. We therefore predict that the relation between gossiper power and gossiping behavior is mediated by the influence motive, such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to influence others (Hypothesis 3a). Furthermore, because higher power people can exert formal control (rather than gossip) to attain desired outcomes from lower power parties, we expect the above relation to be moderated by the power of receiver: lower power

people gossip more than higher power people to exert influence, and this effect is stronger for low power receivers than for high power receivers (hypothesis 3b). Moreover, gossipers may influence receivers by sharing both positive and negative evaluations of others, and we expect the above patterns for both positive and negative gossip.

Social bonding. In evolutionary theory, gossip substitutes grooming as a way to build and maintain social relationships and to find allies and a group to belong to (Dunbar, 2004). Individuals with reduced power need to affiliate with others and find emotional support in order to cope with the high levels of anxiety and threat they experience (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Case et al, 2015). By discovering common perceptions and attitudes about others, people can develop interpersonal closeness, solidarity, and shared social identity (e.g. Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Repeated gossip episodes help develop trust, cement relationships and create a safe environment in which people can express their opinions (Bosson et al, 2006; Foster, 2004). Moreover, by relying on their network for support and comfort, people can avoid direct confrontations and safely de-escalate conflicts through gossip. In sum, because of their reduced access and control over resources, bonding through gossip may be more functional for the powerless than for high power people in order to face daily challenges and achieve desired outcomes (Case et al, 2015; Keltner et al, 2003). Therefore, we expect that the relation between gossiper power and gossip behavior is mediated by the social bonding motive, such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to bond with others (Hypothesis 4a).

Those who do not gossip or do not respond to gossip with a minimum of interest are quickly marginalized (Bergmann, 1993; Foster, 2004), which for most people is a painful experience, because it entails exclusion from a supporting network. However, people may purposely avoid the gossip network of lower power others, because sharing their opinions with them might bring disadvantages. Due to potential status leakage from higher to lower

power people (Podolny, 2005), the powerful may strive to maintain or increase social distance from the powerless, while lower power people may seek to bond with the powerful. Bonding with a lower power partner may damage one's reputation or the power relation, whereas bonding with equal or higher power partners may decrease dependency on others and increase one's informal power (Emerson, 1962). Therefore, we expect the power of receiver to moderate the above relationship, such that lower power people gossip more than higher power people to bond with others, and this effect is stronger for low power receivers than for high power receivers (hypothesis 4b). Furthermore, because both positive and negative gossip help develop expressive employee ties (Grosser et al, 2010), we expect that sharing both positive and negative gossip foster social bonding. Our conceptual model is presented in Figure 2.1.

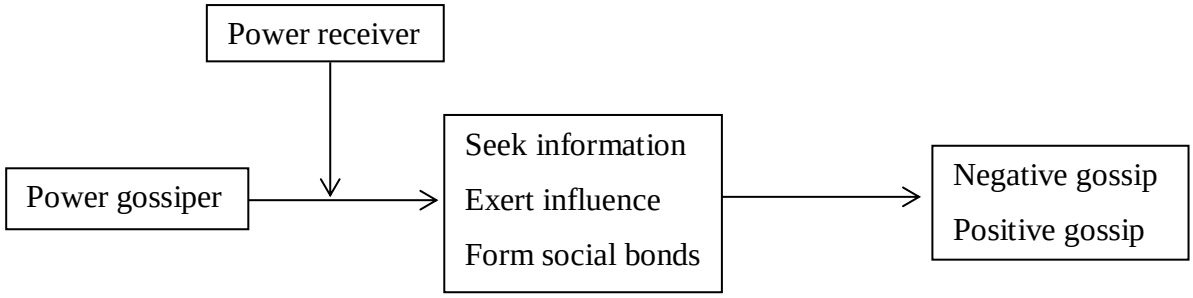

Figure 2.1. Conceptual model

Overview of studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two studies in which we manipulated the power of gossip sender and gossip receiver. In both studies we operationalized power as a dichotomous construct, so that participants have either high or low power. We first conducted a laboratory experiment with a student sample to investigate direct effects of gossipers' and receivers' power on negative gossip behavior (Study 2.1). Subsequently, in a scenario study with a working population sample (Study 2.2) we tested our moderated mediation hypotheses, assessing the role of information, influence and social bonding motives for spreading negative and positive gossip.

Study 2.1

Method

Design and participants. One hundred and twenty eight students (80 female) at a Dutch university with a mean age of 22.24 (*SD* = 2.85) participated in a laboratory study in exchange of course credit or 4 Euros. Participants joined two experimental confederates to form teams of three. These three-person teams were randomly assigned to a power condition in a 2 x 2 factorial design varying the power of the potential gossiper (the participant) and the receiver of gossip (confederate A); the third group member (confederate B, and gossip target) had low power across conditions.

Cover story and power manipulation. We informed participants that we investigated the effect of newcomers and task interruptions on task performance, by using groups of three members. Participants imagined they were the survivors of a spaceship that crashed on the Moon, and had to rank 15 items into three categories according to their usefulness for survival - reaching the space station (Hall & Watson, 1971). Participants were instructed that based on their answers on a leadership questionnaire, all team members were assigned the role of either officer or crew member in the group survival task, independently of other group members' responses, and that it was possible that all, some, or none of them were officers (or crew members, respectively). Before they were told what their and the other's roles were, participants read a detailed description of both officer and crew member roles: the officers had the power to rank 5 unique items without consulting the others, chair the discussion, evaluate the team members' performance, and divide a potential prize of 50 euro between the 3 group members at the end of the study. The participant and confederate A (the potential gossip receiver) were randomly assigned low or high power, and confederate B (the potential gossip target) had low power in all conditions. When both participant and confederate A had high power, the two officers would each have control over 5 items, evaluate the crew

members and suggest a way of dividing the potential prize. Crew members had no specific responsibilities rather than following the commands or instructions of the officer(s).

Procedure. When participants arrived at the laboratory, two female confederates posing as participants were already waiting to begin the study. Upon participants' arrival, the three group members were seated in separate cubicles where they filled in questionnaires, received instructions about the group task and were administered the power manipulations. Participants read that the computer randomly assigned each group member the labels "A", "B" or "C" and were instructed to write this letter on a sticker and wear it until the end of the experiment in order to be visible by the other group members. All participants received the label "C". Next, participants read that the newcomer role was randomly assigned by the computer to another team member (who was always confederate A), and that this person would start solving the group task alone and join the other two participants after a few minutes.

Afterwards, participants filled in the leadership questionnaire based on which they were told that they and the other group members were assigned the role of either officer (high power) or crew member (low power) for the survival task. Next, participants read a description of the Moon survival task.

Afterwards, the participant and confederate B (the potential gossip target) went to a meeting room where they started discussing the task, while confederate A, the newcomer (and potential gossip receiver), would start the task alone in a separate room. Confederate B was instructed to act uncooperatively by saying: "This task is really boring," "I don't know what to say, all the items seem the same to me," and to express disinterest in the task by leaning away from the table and pushing the materials towards the participant.

After three minutes the newcomer (confederate A) joined the team. At this moment the experimenter repeated the power manipulation by providing instructions and materials for

the high power group members, if there were any in the group. The teams engaged in the task for about 3 minutes. Afterwards, the experimenter returned and announced the task interruption (which was presented in the beginning as part of the research). The experimenter explained that confederate B was randomly chosen to leave the room, while the remaining two members (the participant and confederate A) stayed in the meeting room but could not discuss the task until B returned. Thus, participants were provided with an opportunity to gossip about confederate B. Unless participants started talking spontaneously, confederate A was instructed to casually ask participants how they experienced the task in the first stage, when they worked only with confederate B. After approximately two minutes confederate B returned and the groups finished the task. At the end of the task participants went back to their cubicles where they filled in other measures and were debriefed.

Measures

Negative gossip. The time interval when participants had the chance to share gossip with confederate A about confederate B was video recorded. Two independent pairs of raters coded whether participants did not gossip (coded with 0), whether they gossiped when triggered by confederate A (coded with 1) or whether they gossiped spontaneously (coded with 2), *Cohen's kappa* = 1. Furthermore, the two coding pairs also coded the content of gossip with two measures reflecting how *evaluative* and how *descriptive* the talk about the target was. The evaluative content varied from not at all evaluative (0, e.g. “I proposed stuff and she just agreed”), to low (1, e.g. “she was not really enthusiastic”), medium (2, e.g. “she is weird”) and high (3, e.g. “she was as cold as ice”), *Cohen's kappa* = 0.92; we averaged the two ratings into a measure of *evaluative gossip content, M* = 0.93; *SD* = 1.02. The descriptive content of gossip, indicating how much detail was provided about the behavior of the target, was coded on a four point scale ranging from not at all descriptive (0, e.g. “she was withdrawn and closed”), to low (1, e.g. “she suggested one thing but not really”), medium (2,

e.g. “it was like one way traffic, she didn’t say anything”); 3 = high (e.g. “this girl doesn’t think it is interesting, she thought it was boring, she wasn’t interested, it wasn’t a really active discussion, she said I’m not sure, I don’t know”), *Cohen's kappa* = 0.94; we averaged the two ratings into a measure of *descriptive gossip content*, M = 1.23; SD = 1.11. We summed the descriptive and evaluative gossip ratings to calculate the *gossip intensity*, α = 0.78, M = 2.16; SD = 1.94.

Manipulation checks. We asked participants to indicate on dichotomous measures for all team members (A – gossip receiver, B – gossip target, and C - participant) whether they had high or low power (officer or crew member). Afterwards, we measured participants’ perceived power of all members of their group, by using four Likert-type items (1- not at all; 7 very much): “How much was A/B/C in charge of directing the group task?”, How much is A/B/C in charge of evaluating the other participants?”, “How much is A/B/C in charge of allocating the 50 euro bonus?”, and “To what extent did/does A/B/C have power over the Regular Crew Members?”. Internal consistency of these scales was sufficient: α receiver power = .90; α participant power = .85, α target power = .89.

Results

Manipulation checks. All participants correctly indicated whether they were assigned to the high power (N = 64) or low power condition (N = 64). All participants who interacted with a low power gossip receiver correctly indicated that confederate A was a crew member (N = 63), and 8 out of 65 participants assigned to the high power receiver condition incorrectly indicated that confederate A had low power. Moreover, 5 participants incorrectly indicated that the gossip target (confederate B) had high power. A total of 8 participants wrongly indicated the power level of at least one confederate and were excluded from further analyses[2]. Two-way ANOVAs with gossiper power and receiver power as predictors

[2] The results did not change when these participants were included in the analysis.

indicated that participants' perceived power was higher when they were assigned high power (M = 6.19; SD = 0.56) than low power (M = 3.38; SD = 1.44), F (1, 116) = 196.07, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.62$; the power of receiver and the interaction effect were not significant. Participants perceived the power of the gossip receiver to be higher when gossip receivers were assigned high power (M = 6.14; SD = .68) as compared to low power (M = 3.11; SD = 1.49), F (1, 116) = 195.98, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.62$; the power of gossiper and the interaction effect were not significant. We can conclude that the power manipulations were generally successful.

Gossip. Before further analyses we excluded 3 participants due to procedural errors (e.g. participant saw confederates in the lab prior to the experiment), and 10 other participants who indicated either during the interaction with confederate A or during the debriefing that they were certain that the gossip target was a confederate in the experiment. From the remaining 107 participants, 33 did not gossip at all, 61 gossiped when triggered by confederate A, and 13 gossiped spontaneously. A binary logistic regression, where no gossip was coded with 0 and gossip behavior was coded with 1, showed that gossiper power influenced the probability to gossip, b = -.40, p = .066, indicating that 79.62 % of participants in the low power condition gossiped, compared to 58.49 % in the high power condition, as shown in Table 2.1. Whether participants gossiped or not was not predicted by receiver power, b = .33, ns, or by the interaction between gossiper and receiver power, b = -.14, ns.

We conducted a two-way ANOVA on the gossip intensity measure, with gossiper power and receiver power as predictors. Participants gossiped more intensely when they had low power (M = 2.59; SD = 1.98) than high power (M = 1.61; SD = 1.80), F (1, 103) = 6.89, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$, supporting hypothesis 1a. There was no effect of receiver power nor an interaction effect of gossiper and receiver power, F (1, 103) = 0.01, ns, and F (1, 103) = 0.02, ns, respectively, which does not support hypothesis 1b (means are presented in Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Means and standard deviations of gossip intensity and number of participants who gossiped per experimental condition in Study 2.1

Power gossiper	Low			High		
Power receiver	Low	High	Total	Low	High	Total
N Gossiped/*N* Total (%)	21 / 29 (72.41%)	22 / 25 (88 %)	43 / 54 (79.62%)	16 / 29 (55.17%)	15 / 24 (62.5%)	31 / 53 (58.49%)
M gossip intensity (*SD*)	2.63 (2.21)	2.54 (1.71)	2.59 (1.98)	1.60 (1.87)	1.62 (1.75)	1.61 (1.80)

N = 107

Discussion

Findings were in line of our prediction that people with low power gossip more than people with high power. However, results did not support our expectation that the receiver's power moderates the effect of gossiper power on gossiping behavior. There was no effect of gossip receiver power, possibly due to the experimental setup. To create realistic conditions for participants to gossip, our study required the use of two confederates: a gossip target and a gossip receiver. The downside of this complex setup is that the confederates had strict instructions for the interaction with the participants. To make the role of gossip receiver easier to play, the script did not differ in the low and high receiver power condition: during the task confederate A behaved in the same way regardless of the power level she was assigned, and did not emphasize specific behavioral cues associated with low or high power (e.g. directing the discussion and exerting control over the items she was assigned). Thus, it is likely that participants were aware of the power role assignment for all group members (as indicated by the manipulation checks), but in fact did not experience confederate A's power differently in the high and low power condition. As a consequence, participants may have been focused solely on their own power level, ignoring the power level of the receiver.

To overcome these methodological limitations, we conducted a second study with a different setup, in which the power of gossiper and receiver are both salient. We also aimed to investigate whether the power of the gossip target is a relevant factor in shaping gossip behavior. Thus, we conducted a scenario study in which we orthogonally crossed the power of

gossiper, receiver, and target. Moreover, in order to clarify the mechanism driving gossip, we measured gossip motives: information seeking, exerting influence and social bonding. Furthermore, in Study 2.2 we investigated whether spreading negative and positive gossip follow the same pattern.

Study 2.2

Method

Participants and design. Two hundred and seventy six individuals employed or studying in the Netherlands (M_{age} = 34.78, SD_{age} = 13.84; 151 male, 10 unspecified) working in different sectors (e.g. retail, IT, finance, education) voluntarily and anonymously completed an online survey which was distributed using a snowballing method, with a response rate of 55.42 %. The study had a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design, crossing power of gossiper, power of receiver and the power of the target; participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that they worked in a hospital at the cardiology ward, where they had just finished a long surgery with a team of specialists, along with their colleague Sam (potential gossip target). During the surgery the patient became unstable and the situation was getting out of control. We asked participants to imagine that the following happened:

> "You asked Sam if anything looked suspicious in the patient's file," to which Sam replied "I didn't have time to check the file before surgery," whereas it is every doctor's obligation to inspect thoroughly a patient's file prior to surgery. You yourself did inspect the file, and although you saw no suspicious irregularities, it is standard procedure that all operating doctors inspect the file to prevent medical errors. In your opinion, Sam's failure to inspect the file indicates carelessness and a bad professional attitude. While you were struggling to keep the patient alive, Sam looked at the medical

equipment connected to the patient and noticed that the patient was not receiving enough oxygen, due to a suboptimal computer procedure. Fortunately, Sam identified the problem before any irreversible damage occurred. In the end the operation was successful and the patient's heart was restored. You were quite impressed by Sam's professional skills and the attentive and quick response to the situation."

After the surgery, participants were asked to imagine that they go to the hospital restaurant, where they run into Max (potential gossip receiver), a cardiology colleague who was not present at the surgery but asks how it went.

Manipulations. Participants imagined they work in a cardiology ward, where there are 3 full professors who train and supervise 6 assistant doctors. The professors are in charge of the cardiology ward and determine the tasks that the assistants do. We manipulated the power of *participant (potential gossiper)*, the *gossip receiver* (colleague Max) and the *gossip target* (colleague Sam), by assigning them to either a high power position – cardiology professor, or a low power position – cardiology assistant doctor.

Measures

Manipulation checks. Participants indicated on dichotomous variables whether they, the gossip receiver and the gossip target were either professors of cardiology or assistant doctors. Furthermore, we measured participants' subjective sense of power in their role as either professor of cardiology or assistant doctor, using 3 Likert-type items ranging from 1- not at all, to 7 - very much: "how powerful would you feel?", "how much influence would you have?", and "how much control over resources would you have?", $\alpha = .83$.

Dependent measures. We measured *negative gossip* with one Likert-type item "How likely are you to tell Max about Sam, the cardiology professor/assistant doctor with whom you conducted the heart surgery, that Sam didn't check the patient file prior to the surgery, whereas it is every doctor's obligation to do so. In your opinion, Sam acted irresponsibly,

because this careless behavior put the patient's life in danger" and *positive gossip* with one item "[…] during the surgery Sam was the only one who noticed that the oxygen flow to the patient was not working properly. In your opinion Sam acted professionally, because this attentive and quick response to the situation saved the patient's life"[3].

To examine whether hypothesized power effects are unique for gossip behavior, we also asked participants to indicate how likely they are to communicate formally their evaluations about the target, by mentioning their negative and positive opinion about Sam in an anonymous inter-employee official and confidential evaluation form.

Mediators. Participants indicated on Likert scales to what degree the following reasons were important in determining them to gossip *negatively* about the target: *information seeking*, measured with two items: "To find out what Max thinks about it" and "To get a better understanding of Sam's behavior," $\alpha = 0.64$; *social influence*, measured with four items: "To influence Max 's opinion about Sam," "To inform Max that this happened with Sam," "Max should know about Sam's behavior," and "To let Max know what I think of Sam," $\alpha = 0.82$; *and social bonding*, measured with four items: "To make friends with Max," "To become more socially connected with Max," "To receive support from Max," and "To seek some encouragement from Max," $\alpha = 0.91$. The motives for sharing positive gossip, *information seeking*, $\alpha = 0.72$, *social influence*, $\alpha = 0.83$, and *social bonding*, $\alpha = 0.90$, were measured with similar items.

Results

Manipulation checks. We checked whether participants recalled correctly the power roles assigned to themselves, the gossip receiver and the gossip target. Four participants in the

[3] We also asked participants to report how "comfortable," "eager," and "obligated" they felt to gossip negatively and positively. These alternative measures of negative and positive gossip were highly correlated with gossip spreading likelihood ($r_{negative} = .72$, $p < .001$, and $r_{positive} = .74$, $p < .001$) and yielded similar results (all coefficients and significance levels reported below).

low power condition and 20 in the high power condition incorrectly recalled their role assignment; 26 participants who interacted with a low power receiver and 12 who interacted with a high power receiver incorrectly remembered the receiver's power role; 16 participants who interacted with a low power target and 18 who interacted with a high power target incorrectly remembered the target's power role. We excluded 65 participants who failed at least one manipulation check. The remaining 211 participants experienced a higher sense of power in the high power condition (M = 5.09) as compared to the low power condition (M = 3.00), F (1, 210) = 286.12, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .57$. The distribution of participants across experimental conditions is presented in Appendix 1 (p. 146).

Hypothesis testing. Because we expected a similar pattern of results for negative and positive gossip, in the following section we reported the analyses first for negative gossip and afterwards for positive gossip. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.2.

Negative and positive gossip. We conducted three-way ANOVAs with gossiper power, receiver power and target power as predictors of negative and positive gossip. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, results showed that people with low power negatively gossiped more than people with high power, F (1, 202) = 4.43, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.3, row 1. Hypothesis 1b predicted that the effect of gossiper power would be stronger for low power receivers. ANOVA first showed that people gossiped negatively more to high power receivers than to low power receivers, F (1, 202) = 26.60, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Consistent with predictions, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction of gossiper power and receiver power, F (1, 202) = 16.23, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, showing that low-power people were equally likely to gossip negatively with low-power and high-power receivers, F (1, 206) = 0.54, ns. However, high power people gossiped negatively more with high power than with low power receivers, F (1, 206) = 48.54,

$p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$. The interaction is shown in Figure 2.2, and the means are presented in Table 2.3, row 1.

For power of target, only one effect was observed, which involved an unanticipated interaction between receiver power and target power on negative gossip, F (1, 202) = 4.29, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Simple effect analyses showed that towards high power receivers, people gossiped negatively more about low power targets (M = 4.67, SD = 1.89) than about high power targets (M = 3.76, SD = 1.84), F (1, 207) = 7.01, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, whereas towards low power receivers, people gossip negatively to the same extent about low (M = 2.60, SD = 1.74) and high power targets (M = 2.95, SD = 2.09), F (1, 207) = 0.81, ns. None of the other main or interaction effects involving target power was significant for negative gossip, all $F <$ 1.82, *ns*.

Parallel results were obtained for positive gossip. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, people with low power positively gossiped more than people with high power, F (1, 202) = 4.16, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.3, row 5. Hypothesis 1b predicted that the effect of gossiper power would be stronger for low power receivers. ANOVA first showed that people gossiped positively more to high power receivers than to low power receivers, F (1, 202) = 6.74, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Consistent with predictions, this main effect were qualified by a significant interaction of gossiper power and receiver power on positive gossip, F (1, 202) = 5.87, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, showing that low-power people were equally likely to gossip positively with low-power and high-power receivers F (1, 206) = 0.31, ns. However, high power people gossiped more with high power than with low power receivers, F (1, 206) = 12.82, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. This interaction is shown in Figure 2.3, and the means are presented in Table 2.3, row 5. None of the effects involving target power was significant for positive gossip, all $F < 2.71$, *ns*.

Table 2.2. Means and correlations for variables in Study 2.2

	Mean (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Gossiper power	.06 (1.00)	1											
2. Receiver power	.13 (.99)	-.07	1										
3. Target power	.01 (1.00)	-.11	.01	1									
4. Negative gossip	3.64 (2.06)	-.11	.32**	-.05	1								
5. Positive gossip	5.26 (1.58)	-.09	.21**	.14*	.49**	1							
6. Info seeking (n)	3.32 (1.66)	-.15*	.19**	.04	.62**	.32**	1						
7. Influence (n)	3.19 (1.48)	-.14*	.34**	-.03	.73**	.35**	.76**	1					
8. Bonding (n)	2.46 (1.44)	-.17*	.01	.12	.34**	.17*	.66**	.56**	1				
9. Info seeking (p)	3.41 (1.64)	-.11	.10	.06	.51**	.38**	.75**	.62**	.60**	1			
10. Influence (p)	3.49 (1.49)	-.08	.24**	.09	.62**	.47**	.61**	.71**	.47**	.70**	1		
11. Bonding (p)	2.49 (1.39)	-.21**	-.01	.09	.25**	.18**	.54**	.46**	.80**	.53**	.42**	1	
12. Gender[4]	-.12 (.99)	-.09	-.02	.07	.01	-.01	.04	.05	.05	-.009	-.01	.10	1

N = 210; * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. Gossiper power, receiver power and target power were coded with -1 for low power and 1 for high power; n = mediator of negative gossip; p = mediator of positive gossip; gender was coded with -1 for male and 1 for female

[4] The correlations with gender are based on data from 202 participants who reported their gender. We included gender as a control variable in all subsequent ANOVA and moderated mediation analyses; all coefficients were above conventional significance levels (all $F < .03$; all $t < 1.05$; all $p > .29$), suggesting that gender did not predict gossip spreading intentions or gossip motives.

Table 2.3. Means and standard deviations for dependent variables in Study 2.2, per experimental condition (collapsed over power of gossip target).

Dependent variable		Low power receiver	High power receiver	**Average gossiper**
1. Negative gossip	Low power gossiper	3.72 (1.98)	3.95 (1.95)	**3.86 (1.95)**
	High power gossiper	2.13 (1.66)	4.59 (1.82)	**3.44 (2.13)**
	Average receiver	**2.81 (1.96)**	**4.27 (1.90)**	
2.Information (negative)	Low power gossiper	3.87 (1.67)	3.42 (1.59)	**3.60 (1.63)**
	High power gossiper	2.27 (1.50)	3.77 (1.48)	**3.07 (1.66)**
	Average receiver	**2.96 (1.75)**	**3.60 (1.54)**	
3. Influence (negative)	Low power gossiper	3.43 (1.49)	3.40 (1.25)	**3.41 (1.34)**
	High power gossiper	2.00 (1.34)	3.87 (1.19)	**3.00 (1.57)**
	Average receiver	**2.62 (1.57)**	**3.64 (1.24)**	
4. Social bonding (negative)	Low power gossiper	3.18 (1.64)	2.43 (1.41)	**2.72 (1.54)**
	High power gossiper	1.88 (1.15)	2.52 (1.37)	**2.22 (1.31)**
	Average receiver	**2.44 (1.52)**	**2.46 (1.44)**	
5. Positive gossip	Low power gossiper	5.46 (1.31)	5.52 (1.37)	**5.49 (1.34)**
	High power gossiper	4.50 (1.96)	5.54 (1.36)	**5.05 (1.74)**
	Average receiver	**4.91 (1.77)**	**5.53 (1.96)**	
6. Information (positive)	Low power gossiper	3.78 (1.51)	3.51 (1.55)	**3.62 (1.53)**
	High power gossiper	2.79 (1.71)	3.62 (1.64)	**3.23 (1.71)**
	Average receiver	**3.21 (1.69)**	**3.57 (1.59)**	
7. Influence (positive)	Low power gossiper	3.71 (1.52)	3.56 (1.27)	**3.62 (1.37)**
	High power gossiper	2.61 (1.59)	4.05 (1.24)	**3.38 (1.58)**
	Average receiver	**3.08 (1.64)**	**3.80 (1.28)**	
8. Social bonding (positive)	Low power gossiper	3.07 (1.45)	2.64 (1.38)	**2.81 (1.42)**
	High power gossiper	2.10 (1.29)	2.31 (1.32)	**2.21 (1.31)**
	Average receiver	**2.51 (1.44)**	**2.48 (1.36)**	
9. Negative formal evaluation	Low power gossiper	5.28 (1.79)	5.32 (1.73)	**5.30 (1.74)**
	High power gossiper	5.21 (1.81)	5.14 (1.64)	**5.17 (1.72)**
	Average receiver	**5.24 (1.79)**	**5.23 (1.68)**	
10. Positive formal evaluation	Low power gossiper	6.10 (1.16)	5.87 (0.98)	**5.96 (1.05)**
	High power gossiper	6.02 (1.09)	5.85 (1.09)	**5.93 (1.09)**
	Average receiver	**6.05 (1.11)**	**5.86 (1.03)**	

N = 210; standard deviations are presented between brackets

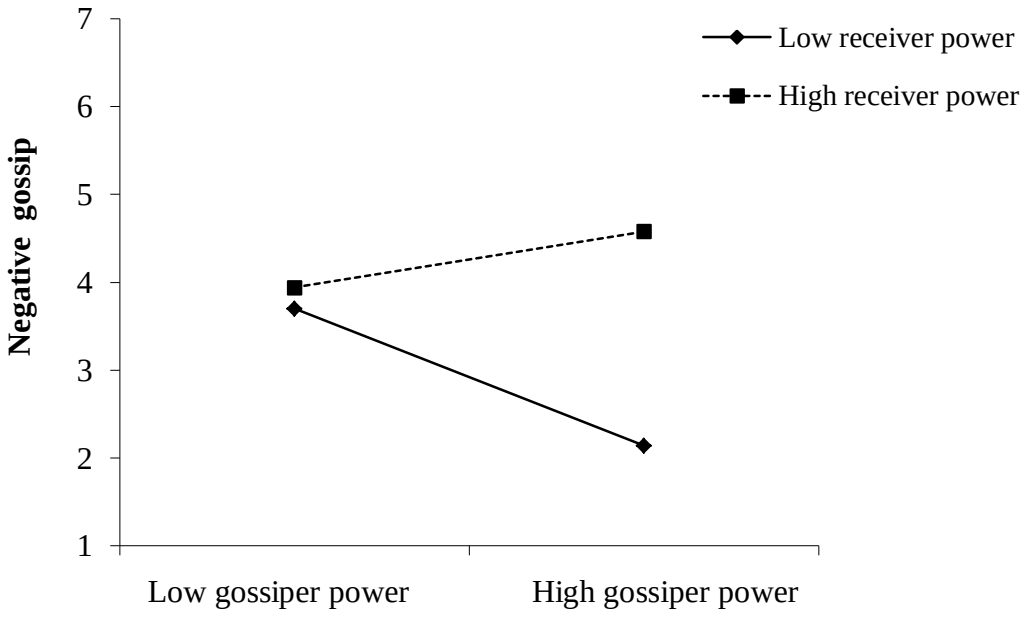

Figure 2.2. Negative gossip as a function of gossiper power and receiver power in Study 2.2.

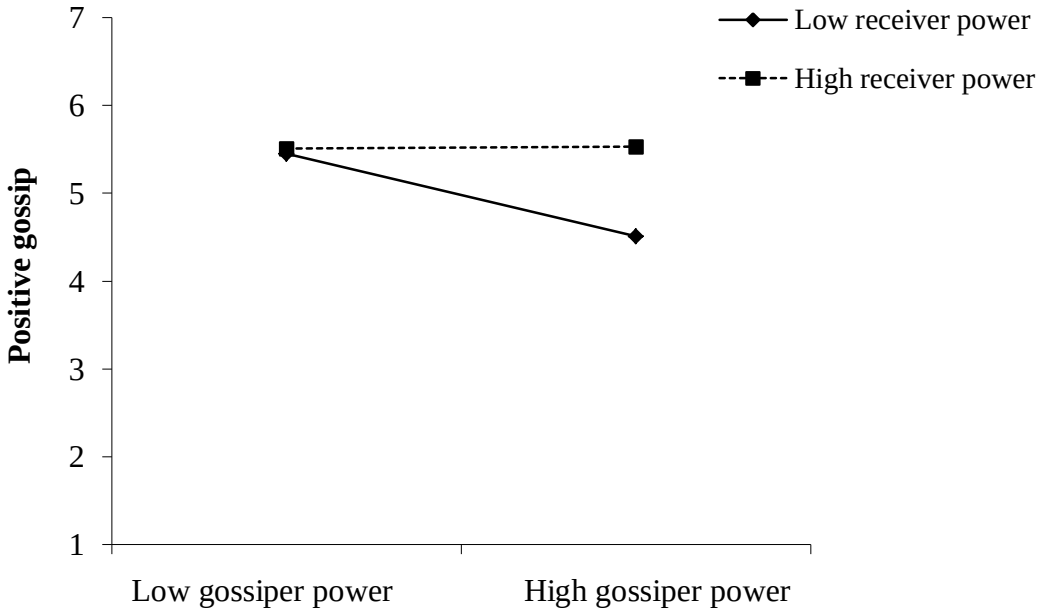

Figure 2.3. Positive gossip as a function of gossiper power and receiver power in Study 2.2.

Table 2.4. Conditional indirect effects analyses in Study 2.2 for negative and positive gossip.

Negative gossip	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Mediator models	Seeking information (n)	Influence (n)	Social bonding (n)
	b (t)	*b (t)*	*b (t)*
Gossiper power (GP)	-.30** (-2.83)	-.23** (-2.61)	-.30** (-3.08)
Receiver power (RP)	.26* (2.41)	.46*** (5.01)	-.02 (-.29)
GP * RP	.48*** (4.46)	.47*** (5.16)	.34*** (3.55)
Dependent variable models: Negative gossip	*b (t)*	*b (t)*	*b (t)*
Gossiper power	-.005 (-.04)	.005 (.05)	-.08 (-.65)
Seeking information (n)	.77*** (11.42)		
Influence (n)		1.02*** (15.61)	
Social bonding (n)			.47*** (5.05)
Conditional indirect effects	effect [CI_{low}; CI_{high}]	effect [CI_{low}; CI_{high}]	effect [CI_{low}; CI_{high}]
Low power receiver	-.61 [-.91; -.35]	-.73 [-1.07; -.44]	-.30 [-.50; -.14]
High power receiver	.13 [-.07; .34]	.24 [.003; .45]	.02 [-.09; .16]

Positive gossip	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Mediator models	Seeking information (p)	Influence (p)	Social bonding (p)
	b (t)	*b (t)*	*b (t)*
Gossiper power (GP)	-.21^{+} (-1.93)	-.15 (-1.53)	-.32*** (-3.41)
Receiver power (RP)	.14 (1.24)	.32** (3.31)	-.05 (0.55)
GP * RP	.27* (2.42)	.39*** (4.06)	.15^{+} (1.66)
Dependent variable models: Positive gossip	*b (t)*	*b (t)*	*b (t)*
Gossiper power	-.15 (-1.49)	-.16 $^{+}$ (-1.67)	-.16 (-1.49)
Seeking information	.36*** (5.86)		
Influence		.49*** (7.58)	
Social bonding			.18* (2.40)
Conditional indirect effects	effect [CI_{low}; CI_{high}]	effect [CI_{low}; CI_{high}]	effect [CI_{low}; CI_{high}]
Low power receiver	-.17 [-.35; -.05]	-.27 [-.49; -.11]	-.09 [-.21; -.01]
High power receiver	.02 [-.07; .13]	.12 [.01; .24]	-.03 [-.10; .007]

N = 210; $^{+}$ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; $^{+}$ $p < .06$; Gossiper power, receiver power, and target power were coded with -1 for low power and 1 for high power; ; n = mediator of negative gossip; p = mediator of positive gossip.

Negative and positive gossip mediators. We used the bootstrapping procedure outlined by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), to assess the conditional indirect effects of gossiper and receiver power on negative and positive gossip through information seeking, social influence and social bonding motives[5]. Means are shown in Table 2.3, and regression results are shown in Table 2.4.

Information. In line with hypothesis 2a, low-power people were more motivated to seek information by gossiping negatively than were high-power people (regression coefficients are presented in Table 2.4, Model 1). This effect was qualified by a significant interaction with receiver power, showing that regardless of their own level of power, people sought information through negative gossip from high-power receivers, $b_{negative\ gossip} = .17$, ns. However, as compared to low-power people, high power people sought less information from low-power receivers, $b_{negative\ gossip} = -.79$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, as shown in Model 1, information seeking increased sharing of negative gossip. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 2b, the indirect effect of gossiper power on negative gossip through information seeking was significant only for low-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{negative\ gossip} = -.61$ [-.91; -.35], but not for high-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{negative\ gossip} = .13$ [-.07; .34].

Results showed a similar trend for positive gossip. In line with hypothesis 2a, low-power people were more motivated to seek information by gossiping positively than were high-power people (regression coefficients are presented in Table 2.4, Model 4). This effect was qualified by a significant interaction with receiver power, showing that regardless of their own level of power, people sought information through positive gossip from high-power receivers, $b_{positive\ gossip} = .05$, ns. However, as compared to low-power people, high-power

[5] We tested each conditional indirect effect in a different model, because entering the mediators simultaneously in the analysis generated multicollinearity (given the high intercorrelations between the mediators). Analyses with simultaneous mediators yielded significant positive effects of information and influence on negative gossip, but the effect of bonding was negative. Only influence had a significant effect on positive gossip.

people sought less information from low-power receivers, $b_{positive\ gossip} = -.49$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, as shown in Model 4, information seeking increased sharing of positive gossip. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 2b, the indirect effect of gossiper power on positive gossip through information seeking was significant only for low-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{positive\ gossip} = -.17$ [-.35; -.05], but not for high-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{positive\ gossip} = .02$ [-.07; .13].

These conditional indirect effects show that compared to powerful people, people with low power gossiped more to low-power receivers in order to seek information, whereas people with low and high power gossiped to the same extent to high-power receivers in order to obtain information through negative and positive gossip.

Influence. As predicted by hypothesis 3a, low-power people negatively gossiped more in order to influence the receiver, than did high-power people. The interaction of gossiper power with receiver power was significant for negative gossip, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 2. High-power people wanted to influence high-power receivers marginally more than low-power people did, $b_{negative\ gossip} = .23$, $p = .052$, but as compared to low-power people, high-power people wanted to influence low-power receivers less, $b_{negative\ gossip} = -.71$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, desire to influence increased negative gossip (coefficients are presented in Table 2.4, Model 2). Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 3b, the indirect effect of gossiper power on negative gossip mediated by desire to influence was negative for low-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{negative\ gossip} = -.73$ [-1.07; -.44], and positive for high-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{negative\ gossip} = .24$ [.003; .45].

For positive gossip, hypothesis 3a, predicating that low-power people have a higher influence motive than high-power people, was not supported. However, the interaction of gossiper power with receiver power on positive gossip was significant, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 5. High-power people wanted to influence high-power receivers marginally more than

low-power people did, $b_{positive\ gossip}$ = .23, p = .054, but as compared to low-power people, high-power people wanted to influence low-power receivers less, $b_{positive\ gossip}$ = -.55, p < .001. Furthermore, desire to influence increased positive gossip (coefficients are presented in Table 2.4, Model 5). Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 3b, the indirect effect of gossiper power on gossip behavior mediated by desire to influence was negative for low-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{positive\ gossip}$ = -.27 [-.49; -.11], and positive for high-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{positive\ gossip}$ = .12 [.01; .24].

Thus, people with low power gossiped negatively and positively to low-power receivers in order to exert influence more than high-power people did, whereas people with high power gossiped to high-power receivers in order to influence them more than low-power people did.

Social bonding. As predicted by hypothesis 4a, low-power people negatively gossiped in order to bond with the receiver more than did high-power people. This effect was qualified by an interaction with receiver power, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 3. People wanted to bond with high-power receivers regardless of their own power, $b_{negative\ gossip}$ = .04, ns, but as compared to low-power people, high-power people wanted to bond less with low-power receivers, $b_{negative\ gossip}$ = -.64, p < .001. Furthermore, bonding motivation increased negative gossip, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 3. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 4b, the effect of gossiper power on negative gossip motivated by social bonding was significant for low-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{negative\ gossip}$ = -.30 [-.50; -.14], but not for high-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{negative\ gossip}$ = .02 [-.09; .16].

Results showed a similar trend for positive gossip. As predicted by hypothesis 4a, low-power people positively gossiped in order to bond with the receiver more than did high-power people. This effect was qualified by an interaction with receiver power, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 6. People wanted to bond with high-power receivers regardless of their own

power, $b_{positive\ gossip}$ = -.16, ns, but as compared to low-power people, high-power people wanted to bond less with low-power receivers, $b_{positive\ gossip}$ = -.48, $p < .001$. Furthermore, bonding motivation increased positive gossip, as shown in Table 2.4, Model 6. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 4b, the effect of gossiper power on positive gossip motivated by social bonding was significant for low-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{positive\ gossip}$ = -.09 [-.21; -.01], but not for high-power receivers, *indirect effect* $_{positive\ gossip}$ = -.03 [-.10; .007].

Therefore, people with low-power gossiped negatively and positively to low-power receivers in order to bond more than high-power people did, whereas people with low and high power gossiped to the same extent to high-power receivers to bond.

Formal evaluative communication. To investigate whether power differences might shape formal evaluations similarly to gossip, we asked people how likely they were to share their negative and their positive opinions about the target in a formal inter-employee evaluation questionnaire. Three-way ANOVAs on negative and positive formal target evaluations revealed no main effects of sender power, receiver power and target power, and no two-way or three-way interactions (all $F < 2.73$, ns; means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.3, rows 9 and 10).

Discussion

Consistent with Study 2.1, results showed that participants who had low power gossiped more than participants who had high power, and that the motives to seek information, influence and form social bonds mediated this effect. Moreover, results supported our hypotheses that receiver power moderates the effect of gossiper power on spreading gossip, showing that low power people gossip more than high power people towards low power receivers in order to seek information, exert influence, and bond, whereas low and high power people do not differ in gossiping towards high power receivers. Importantly, results showed that power differences shaped negative and positive gossip in the

same way, and the motives of information, influence and bonding motivated both types of gossip. Furthermore, the analyses showed that power of gossiper and receiver shaped gossip behavior, but not formal communication with the same content.

General Discussion

Power provides advantages such as access to resources, optimal affective and cognitive functioning, higher agency towards goals (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007), and relative lower power motivates people to engage in behaviors that can address their specific needs. Our results show that individuals' power position shapes gossip behavior. People share gossip preferentially with others of equal or higher power, because it is functional to learn from, influence or affiliate with powerful others. Rosnow (2001) notes that gossip is instrumental in bringing some personal benefit to the storyteller. Upward gossip is a one-sided strategic way to connect with others who are likely to help fulfill one's needs. As such, gossip is a levelling force that helps individuals cope with power differences.

First, people gossip to decode others' behaviors and understand their intentions. Gossipers seek information about others' functioning, with the goal of better understanding and controlling their own functioning (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). Gossip may have a negative reputation because it seems intrusive (Bergmann, 1993), but it helps people with reduced information access to learn from insightful others – one's equals and superiors.

Second, people gossip to influence other's opinions and worldview. Individuals may draw social comparisons through gossip in order to elicit a good impression about themselves to those who can help them (Nicholson, 2001). Direct self-promotion is socially undesirable, but, in order to function optimally at the workplace, people need to secure a good reputation, especially among higher power people (Burt, 2008). Because gossipers shape the way receivers think about gossip senders, the targets, or even about themselves (Martinescu et al, 2014), gossip is a way to informally exert power. As such, people constrained by formal

power structures can informally negotiate their relationships and positions within the organization through gossip (Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

Third, people gossip to develop social bonds with others. Gossip helps people build friendships (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012a), which are desirable when the gossip receiver has equal or higher power (Case et al, 2015). Developing expressive ties with powerful people may provide individuals with resources or social support in the future. Alliances with powerful others make people less vulnerable to risks or threats that may be present in their environment.

In addition, results of Study 2.2 showed that people's gossip behavior was shaped by their own and the receivers' power positions, but that the likelihood of sharing the same information anonymously through a formal channel did not change with gossipers' or receivers' power. These findings suggest that gossip is an attractive way of regulating power differences, while formal communication is not. Unlike formal communication, gossip can be emotional, spontaneous, playful, and symbolic, which are essential elements for creating interpersonal connections in organizations (Gabriel, 1991). People fulfill their needs by connecting with others through lateral or upward gossip, and not through formal channels.

Lastly, because gossip is a social phenomenon that involves at least three parties, the sender, receiver, and target of gossip, the power of the target is likely to be important as well in spreading gossip. For example, some empirical evidence shows that low status individuals are particularly interested in gossip about others of high status (McAndrew, et al, 2007; Ellwardt et al, 2012b). Employees often seek gossip about people in higher rather than lower positions; negative gossip about powerful others is especially valued due to functional dependence on them (McAndrew et al, 2007; Noon & Delbridge, 1993, Wert & Salovey, 2004). Results of Study 2.2 did not replicate these findings, possibly because repeated interactions with targets may be needed to evoke these responses, and may remain too

abstract in a scenario. However, results showed that people gossiped negatively more to high-power receivers than to low-power receivers about low-power targets (possibly because high power receivers seem better suited to act towards low power targets), but when gossiping about high power targets they did not differentiate between high and low power receivers.

Theoretical implications

Our results suggest that people at different power levels have different preferences for gossip receivers. On the one hand, people approach higher power gossip partners because upward gossip helps them fulfill needs. On the other hand, because associating themselves with others who have lower power may lead to status leakage or disrupt the status quo (Podolny, 2005), people avoid informal connections with lower power others. This is in line with findings from the power literature, showing that the typical approach tendencies of high power people and avoidance tendencies of low power people may be offset by the presence of opportunities to gain power for low power people, and threats of losing power for high power people (e.g. Lammers, Galinksy, Gordiijn, & Otten, 2008; Mead & Maner, 2012), and spreading gossip entails such opportunities or threats.

Because people avoid lower power gossip partners, and seek higher power gossip partners, there is an asymmetry in gossip spreading patterns. This imbalance in the supply and demand for higher power gossip partners may result in most gossip being shared with equal power partners, who are less desirable than higher power gossip partners, but are acceptable because they may have some information, influence or affiliation value for gossipers. Moreover, one's equals are likely to experience a similar gossip asymmetry, making them interested in exchanging gossip. Therefore, lateral gossip, exchanged between people with similar power, may be where the gossip partners are equally interested and rewarded by the interaction.

The gossip tendency asymmetry may create favorable conditions for people to opportunistically receive gossip from lower power senders, without reciprocating with gossip themselves. Thus, power holders may surround themselves with others who flatter them by sharing gossip (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005). Because people who do not reciprocate to shared gossip are disliked and slowly excluded from one's network (Farley, 2011), if such unilateral gossip exchanges do not respond to lower power people's needs for information, influence or affiliation, they may be reduced over time. However, as low-power people cannot realistically expect reciprocity in unequal power interactions, gossiping upwards may be worthwhile for them even without assuming that gossip will be equally reciprocated.

However, there are instances when people may gossip to lower power receivers. When their power position is illegitimate or unstable (Lammers, et al, 2008; Sligte, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011), or when they need timely input about critical affairs, people may strategically gossip downwards. Managers may gossip to key lower power employees in order to quickly find information that can help them make timely decisions, influence others through informal channels, or find new friends who might support them if needed. Gossip is an adaptive behavior because it helps people address goals or needs in specific circumstances.

Practical implications

Our research shows that gossip responds to people's needs that may arise from power differences: finding information, exerting influence, and bonding. Although gossip is a widely disapproved behavior at the workplace because it is perceived as harmful to others, inefficient use of time and waste of organizational resources (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009), it is functional for addressing power-related needs. Contrary to views of gossip as harmful and invasive, because it is exchanged indirectly and privately, gossip may help people avoid or attenuate conflicts in the workplace (Schoeman, 1994). As such, while gossip is motivated by

people's needs to cope with power differences, gossip may also be a mechanism that stabilizes rather than challenges the status quo in organizations.

Although most gossip is spread with benign intentions - learning, gaining control over one's outcomes or bonding (in the current study), some gossip may be explicitly harmful. Because power is desirable, and people actively strive to maintain or increase power (Nicholson, 2001), some may indeed use gossip to compete for resources, sabotage rivals and usurp their power (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Furthermore, some powerholders may feel threatened by benign gossip and become defensive (Mead & Maner, 2012), because gossip helps lower power employees satisfy their needs and create alliances, thus decreasing perceived dependence on the powerful. Although explicitly malicious gossip is relatively rare (Baumeister et al, 2004, Ben-Ze'ev, 1994, Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997), such instances are very salient (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), making all gossip seem dangerous and unacceptable.

The general disapproval of gossip is unfortunate, because in organizations, gossip is vital for group formation and regulation, and it maintains and "oils" formal communication channels. Gossip is intrinsic to social and organizational life, and removing gossip is impossible without banning all forms of communication (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). A moderate level of gossip in the workplace is functional, because gossip responds to individual's needs and maintains group cohesion. Therefore, instead of suppressing all gossip, we advise managers to identify when and why employees gossip and respond accordingly by providing information, more control over processes and outcomes, or by reducing competitive incentives (Wittek & Wielers, 1998).

Limitations and future research

Our research has some noteworthy limitations. First, the two studies we conducted consistently showed that low power people gossip more than high power people. However,

our hypotheses that receivers' power influences gossip spreading were supported in the scenario study but not in the experiment. We believe the inconsistent results between the two studies were caused by the experimental procedure, which did not instruct confederates to enact their power role. Future research should test the effect of gossipers' and receivers' power in an experiment where both gossiper power and receiver power are more successfully manipulated.

Second, in both our studies we operationalize power as hierarchical differences in expertise and control over resources and outcomes. However, in organizations, power differences between individuals might be more subtle, or even differ across domains of expertise. As such, it might be interesting for future research to investigate whether subjectively perceived power differences or different types of power (e.g. expert power, reward power, legitimate power, c.f. French & Raven, 1959) may activate specific gossip motives or spreading patterns.

Third, our studies presented either the artificial setting of a laboratory, or an imaginary situation. Although these studies offer good insights into how power differences shape gossip behavior, a field study would provide higher validity for our results. Moreover, because the strong informal networks within hierarchical organizations develop in parallel with formal networks, and allow people to form coalitions (Wittek & Wielers, 1998), conducting a field study might help answer additional questions about how people use the informal and formal communication structures in different organizations.

Fourth, the gossip motives of information, influence and social bonding suggest that gossip is a behavior that serves distinct functions. However, in the current research these motives were very highly correlated, and we could not test their unique effects on gossip. For individuals it may be difficult to consciously distinguish their motives as they engage in gossip, because gossip is likely to fulfill multiple functions simultaneously. For example,

besides the motives studied here, gossip researchers also identified a fun or social enjoyment motive (e.g. Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Noon, & Delbridge, 1993). Because gossip can address individuals' needs for information, influence or social bonding in a spontaneous, humorous, and playful interaction, people may experience gossip as relaxing and fun, remaining generally unaware of its underlying functions. Future researchers interested in gossip functionality should design studies appropriate for investigating gossip motives (e.g. by manipulating the motives).

Lastly, we propose power differences as the mechanism that drives gossip. However, other factors may interact with one's power level to facilitate gossip, such as hierarchical structure of organizations (Foster, 2004), organizational change (Mills, 2010), breaches of trust (Ellwardt et al, 2012b), competitive environments (Knifin & Wilson, 2005), interdependence between individuals, or monotonous tasks. It would be interesting to further examine how these factors may moderate the effects of power on gossip behavior.

Conclusion

The power position individuals have shapes their needs and gossip behaviors. In a power relation, the lower power individuals cannot fulfill their fundamental needs for autonomy and relatedness by exercising power, which they address by gossiping with equal or higher power others in order to seek information, exert influence, and establish social bonds. Thus, gossip is a functional behavior that responds to individuals' needs and allows them to cope with power differences in an accessible and risk free fashion.

Chapter 3

Tell me the gossip: The self-evaluative function of receiving gossip about others[6]

Abstract

We investigate the self-evaluative function of competence-related gossip for individuals who receive it. Using the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician (SCENT) model, we propose that individuals use evaluative information about others (i.e., gossip) to improve, promote, and protect themselves. Results of a critical incident study and an experimental study showed that positive gossip had higher self-improvement value than negative gossip, whereas negative gossip had higher self-promotion value and raised higher self-protection concerns than positive gossip. Self-promotion mediated the relationship between gossip valence and pride, while self-protection mediated the relationship between gossip valence and fear, although the latter mediated relationship emerged for receivers with mastery goals rather than performance goals. These results suggest that gossip serves self-evaluative functions for gossip receivers and triggers self-conscious emotions.

[6] This chapter is based on Martinescu, E., Janssen, O., & Nijstad, B. A. (2014). Tell Me the Gossip: The Self-Evaluative Function of Receiving Gossip About Others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40*, 1668-1680. doi:10.1177/0146167214554916.

Introduction

Gossip, defined as positive or negative evaluative talk about someone who is not present (Foster, 2004), is pervasive in all domains of social life. Empirical reports suggest that people spend more than two thirds of their daily conversations engaging in some type of interpersonal evaluation (Dunbar, Duncan & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994). To clarify its omnipresence, researchers have predominantly focused on group-serving functions of gossip, such as communicating group norms and sanctioning norm violators (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010), protecting members from being exploited by others (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005), exercising social influence through reputational systems (Burt, 2008; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007), and establishing social bonds (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006; Dunbar, 2004).

Whereas previous research has significantly advanced understanding of gossip, the predominant focus on group-serving functions implies that individuals' interests and needs have largely been overlooked. This is unfortunate because most gossip occurs within a sender-receiver dyad (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012): it is an individual and not a group who gossips (Nevo, Nevo & Derech-Zehavi, 1994; Paine, 1967), and it is an individual and not a group who receives and responds to gossip. We know, however, little about why individuals are interested in receiving gossip, and how they react to it. To address this gap in the literature, we examined how individuals receive gossip about others.

We suggest that receiving gossip is functional for individuals because individuals need evaluative information about others to evaluate themselves. Evaluating one's own abilities and opinions is a fundamental need that can be satisfied indirectly through interpersonal processes, such as social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Although mostly overlooked in the social

comparison literature, gossip may provide information about others that can be used for self-evaluation purposes (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Receiving gossip is an easier and less threatening way of obtaining social comparison information about a target person than more direct encounters (Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Thus, in the current paper, we investigate whether receiving gossip is functional for individuals from a self-evaluation perspective.

Specifically, using the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician model (SCENT, Sedikides & Strube, 1997), we propose that receiving positive and negative gossip is functional for individuals for purposes of self-improvement, self-promotion, or self-protection. We suggest that the self-evaluation value of gossip depends on its valence, with positive gossip having higher self-improvement value and negative gossip having higher self-promotion and self-protection value. Furthermore, given that self-evaluation generates self-conscious emotions (Tracy & Robins 2004), gossip is likely to trigger emotional reactions that are congruent with the self-evaluation value of gossip. We therefore also investigate how different self-conscious emotions (alertness, pride, and fear) associate with the self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value of gossip.

Gossip can involve evaluative information about a target person on different dimensions, such as appearance, personality, peculiarities, or competence. For two reasons we focus on how individuals respond to competence-relevant gossip in achievement situations. Firstly, as posited by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), competence is an innate psychological need that becomes salient in achievement situations. Secondly, previous research has shown that gossip is pervasive in typical achievement contexts such as the workplace, the classroom, or sports (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009; Ellwardt et al., 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). Furthermore, when focusing on gossip in achievement situations, the role of achievement goals becomes important. Based on achievement goal theory (e.g.,

Elliot, 2005; Yeo, Loft, Xiao, & Kiewitz, 2009), we distinguish between *mastery* goals that are focused on developing competence through gaining knowledge, skills, and abilities, and *performance* goals that are focused on demonstrating competence through outperforming others (Elliot, 2005). We examine whether the self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value of gossip depends on (the interaction between gossip valence and) salient achievement goals.

In sum, this study makes three contributions to the literature. First, we examine whether receiving gossip serves a self-evaluation function for individuals. Second, we propose that positive and negative gossip elicits self-conscious emotions that are congruent with the self-evaluation value of the gossip. Finally, we explore how achievement goals influence individuals in their self-evaluations and emotional reactions to gossip.

The SCENT model

According to the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician (SCENT) model, self-evaluation is a fundamental aspect of human nature. Humans are motivated to constantly update the cognitive representations of their attributes, with the ultimate goal of maintaining a positive self-concept (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). The SCENT model assumes that the self-evaluation process serves a strategic self-enhancement function: rather than needing a completely accurate or consistent self-concept, individuals need a positive and well-protected self-concept in order to cope with the world (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Positive feelings about the self are vital for one's mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1994), and help protect against anxiety and defensive behaviors (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Individuals can tactically increase the positivity of their self-concept through self-improvement, by developing self-relevant skills and abilities. They can also increase their self-concept positivity more directly through self-promotion, by making self-flattering social comparisons and attributions, or through self-protection, by avoiding

disadvantageous social comparisons and attributions (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). These self-evaluation motives guide individuals' behaviors and reactions to stimuli in their social environment, such as gossip information.

We propose that self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection motives underlie the value receivers place on gossip. Gossip about others' attributes and behaviors may be functional for self-improvement purposes, because it suggests ways in which the self could become better in the future. In addition, gossip provides social comparison information that reflects whether the self is doing better or worse than relevant others, and thus may have self-promotion or self-protection value. In turn, evaluating the self gives rise to self-conscious emotions, which are experienced when something important for one's well-being occurs (Tangney, 2003). Self-reflection informs people whether or not they have lived up to their actual or ideal self-representation, or to others' representations of them (Leary, 2007; Tracy & Robins 2004). As such, gossip might trigger specific self-conscious emotions that are congruent with the self-evaluation value of gossip. However, because received gossip does not contain explicit information about the self, self-conscious emotions can only be evoked by gossip through self-evaluative processes (e.g., Tracy & Robins 2004). Thus, we propose that individuals first cognitively appraise the received gossip and draw implications for the self through self-evaluative processes, which subsequently generate a congruent emotional response.

Self-improvement

One function that gossip may fulfill for receivers is self-improvement. Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs (2004) argue that gossip has a learning function, because it provides useful lessons about how to be successful or avoid failure in specific social domains. Acquiring evaluative information about relevant others in achievement situations facilitates individuals' achievement pursuits and helps them successfully navigate the social environment (Foster,

2004). Therefore, individuals may be interested in receiving competence-related gossip in an achievement context, because it might have instrumental value for self-improvement.

From a self-improvement perspective, individuals may be more interested in receiving positive compared to negative gossip (Litman & Pezzo, 2005), and may feel instrumental attraction for targets who perform better and can serve as role-models (Yinon, Bizman, & Yagil, 1989). Upward social comparisons motivate individuals to increase their effort when performance-related information about a superior group member is available (Weber & Hertel, 2007). Thus, gossip targets with attainable achievements can inspire self-improvement, because they enable individuals to picture similar future success for themselves (Lockwood & Kunda, 2000). Accordingly, we expect that positive competence-related gossip has higher self-improvement value than negative gossip (hypothesis 1a).

Seeing self-improvement value in (positive) gossip is unlikely to lead to positive or negative emotions, because actual self-improvement may only occur in the future (also see Wayment & Taylor, 1995). However, because positive gossip has instrumental value for individuals interested in developing their competence, we expect that individuals will become more alert after receiving positive gossip. Given that individuals selectively allocate cognitive resources to information that is important for learning (Reynolds & Anderson, 1982) the self-improvement value associated with positive gossip might trigger a mental state of alertness. Therefore, we hypothesize that the self-improvement value of gossip mediates the relationship between competence-related gossip valence and alertness (hypothesis 1b).

Self-promotion

Gossip may also be functional for recipients due to its self-promotion value. Individuals can boost their self-concept positivity by making downward social comparisons, which are inherently present in negative gossip (Wert & Salovey, 2004). The need for positive self-regard motivates people to draw favorable conclusions about themselves. People

do so whenever they can find sufficient justification for their positive self-judgments (Kunda, 1990). Gossip is a rich and easily accessible source of information that can provide this justification. As such, receiving negative gossip is likely to fuel individuals' self-promoting beliefs and feelings that they are better than relevant others (i.e., the targets of gossip), which is important especially in self-relevant domains (Brown, 2012).

Downward comparisons are an effective way to boost self-esteem and make oneself feel good (Wills, 1981). The self-promotion value increases the more the gossip target is similar to the self, because failure of rivals in one's proximity reflects most positively on the self. Evidence from evolutionary psychology shows that people are interested in receiving negative gossip about same-sex others, because such information derogates rivals and promotes the self (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). Thus, negative gossip helps receivers self-promote and maintain positive self-views.

Furthermore, negative gossip might be self-promoting because senders signal to receivers that they are worthy of receiving such sensitive information, or that they are better than the target (Bosson et al., 2006; Grosser et al., 2010). Therefore, negative gossip can enhance receivers' self-perceived status and reputation, because it justifies them positioning themselves above the target in the social hierarchy (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Nevo et al., 1994). We thus hypothesize that negative competence-related gossip has higher self-promotion value than positive gossip (hypothesis 2a).

As a result of self-promotion through downward comparisons, individuals experience elevated feelings of pride (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Pride conveys competence, success or status, and arises when people meet or exceed standards (Tangney, 2003), or achieve a socially valued outcome (Leary, 2007). Receivers of negative gossip might view the performance of the gossip target as a standard they have exceeded, which elicits self-promotion and the associated emotion of pride. Therefore, we expect that self-promotion

value mediates the relationship between competence-related gossip valence and pride (hypothesis 2b).

Self-protection

The self-protection motive is salient when individuals strive to defend themselves against negative self-views. Self-protection helps individuals avoid negative situations and prevent or deflect negative implications for the self (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Positive and negative gossip might activate two distinct types of threats for receivers. On the one hand, making upward comparisons with similar others in a self-relevant domain may threaten individuals' position in the social hierarchy. Accordingly, *positive* gossip may generate feelings of inferiority and may activate receivers' self-protection concerns (Wayment & Taylor, 1995; Wert & Salovey, 2004). On the other hand, negative gossip signals a hostile and threatening social environment where people talk negatively about similar others. Accordingly, *negative* gossip could activate self-protection concerns for receivers because receivers might fear becoming targets of negative gossip themselves, due to a reflection process (Tesser, 1988). Negative gossip can substantially damage one's reputation, because reputation reflects others' impressions rather than objective information about someone (Burt, 2008). Thus, both positive and negative gossip may arouse receivers' self-protection concerns. The principle that bad is stronger than good (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001) would predict that especially receiving negative gossip increases self-protection concerns, because self-protection is an adaptive response to a malignant social environment. Therefore, we tentatively predict that negative competence-related gossip arouses stronger self-protection concern than positive gossip (hypothesis 3a).

Self-protection concern is likely associated with fear or social anxiety, which arise when individuals doubt their ability to create or maintain a favorable impression on others (Leary, 2007). Self-protection is associated with fear, especially in light of negative events

with uncertain outcomes for the self (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989). Accordingly, individuals who receive negative gossip and become concerned with self-protection are likely to experience fearful emotional reactions, as they draw negative implications for their reputation. Fear is an adaptive and functional reaction in situations that pose threats for the individual (Öhman, 1993), because fear helps appraise the situation as threatening and prepare defensive behaviors. We thus expect that self-protection concern mediates the relationship between competence-related gossip valence and fear (hypothesis 3b).

Achievement Goals

We investigate reactions to receiving competence-related gossip in achievement contexts. Achievement goals are salient in achievement-relevant situations and regulate cognition, affect, and action towards a desired state (Yeo et al., 2009); thus achievement goals might influence how recipients respond to competence-related gossip. Achievement goal theory primarily distinguishes between mastery and performance goals (e.g., Yeo et al., 2009). Mastery goals reflect a desire to develop competence by gaining knowledge, skills, and abilities, whereas performance goals reflect a desire to demonstrate competence by outperforming others[7] (Elliot, 2005). Although both mastery and performance goals are fueled by the fundamental need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 2002), they define competence differently. Individuals who pursue mastery goals have intrapersonal standards for competence and feel competent when they improve their performance relative to their previous performance. In contrast, individuals who pursue performance goals have interpersonal standards for competence and feel competent when they outperform others. Given their focus disparity, gossip receivers with mastery and performance goals might interpret and react differently to gossip.

[7] Achievement goals are typically portrayed as approach forms of self-regulation and distinguished from avoidance goals (Elliot, 2005). We restrict the use of the terms "mastery goal" and "performance goal" to the approach versions of the goals.

Achievement goals and self-improvement

Because they focus on competence development, individuals with salient mastery goals might value gossip as instrumental for self-improvement. Accordingly, they might be interested in positive gossip about others' achievements, since positive gossip provides success stories they can learn from. However, individuals could self-improve through negative gossip as well, by learning from others' failures (Baumeister et al., 2004). Individuals for whom mastery goals are salient perceive others as potential allies, who can help them by cooperating and sharing resources (Poortvliet & Giebels, 2012; Poortvliet, Janssen, Van Yperen, & Van de Vliert, 2007). Therefore, individuals with salient mastery goals might increase the value of both positive and negative gossip as a resource for self-improvement. We expect that individuals with salient mastery goals attribute higher self-improvement value to competence-related gossip than individuals with salient performance goals, regardless of gossip valence (hypothesis 4).

Achievement goals and self-promotion

Individuals with salient performance goals focus on demonstrating superior competence and might use received gossip to self-enhance relative to others, either by self-promotion or by self-protection, depending on gossip valence. Individuals with performance goals are competitive, and see others as rivals rather than allies (Poortvliet & Giebels, 2012); they are more exploitative in their interpersonal relations and strive to maximize outcomes for the self at the expense of others (e.g., Poortvliet et al., 2007). Accordingly, because they reach their goal only when they outperform others, individuals who are pursuing performance goals may be interested in obtaining *negative* gossip in order to play up their own attributes relative to those of failing others. Thus, individuals with performance goals might attribute higher self-promotion value to negative competence-related gossip than individuals with mastery goals (hypothesis 5a). Consequently, we expect the indirect effect of gossip valence

on pride through self-promotion value to be stronger for individuals with salient performance goals than for individuals with salient mastery goals (hypotheses 5b).

Achievement goals and self-protection

Achievement goal and gossip valence may interact in their effects on self-protection concern and fear. Specifically, we expect that positive competence-related gossip raises higher self-protection concern for individuals with salient performance rather than mastery goals (hypothesis 6a), because others' success may undermine attainment of one's own performance goal of demonstrating superior competence. Negative gossip, however, signals a malignant social environment which arouses self-protection concern regardless of achievement goal. Thus, we propose that individuals who have mastery goals experience higher self-protection concern when they receive negative rather than positive gossip, whereas self-protection concern among individuals who have performance goals is high irrespective of gossip valence. Accordingly, we expect the indirect effect of gossip valence on fear through self-protection concern to emerge only for individuals with mastery goals, and not for individuals with performance goals (hypothesis 6b). Figure 3.1 displays an overview of our expectations on how gossip valence and achievement goals influence individuals' self-evaluations and emotions in response to received gossip.

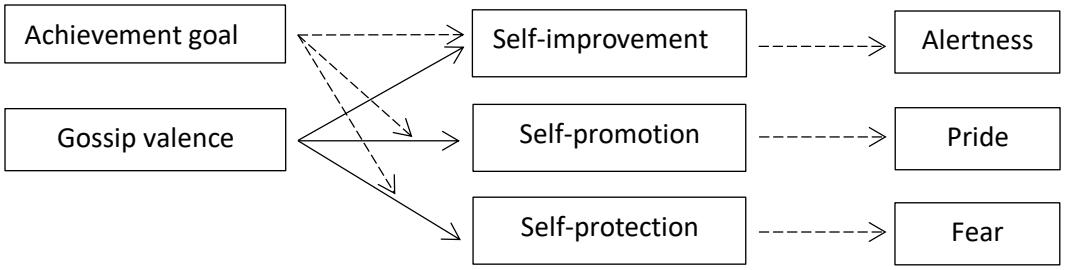

Figure 3.1. Conceptual model. Solid lines represent hypotheses tested in Studies 3.1 and 3.2; dashed lines represent hypotheses tested in Study 3.2.

Study 3.1

To test hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a, we conducted a critical incident study among students of a Dutch university, in which we asked participants to recall an incident of receiving either positive or negative gossip. We then examined whether the valence of the received gossip was related to self-relevant value of gossip.

Method

Design and participants. One hundred eighty-three undergraduates (M_{age}= 20.38, SD_{age} = 2.30; 69 female, 2 not specified) completed an online survey in exchange for course credit. They were randomly assigned to a positive (N = 86) or negative (N = 97) gossip condition. For a medium effect size with 2 groups at power .80 and α =.05, about 90 participants are needed (GPOWER, Erdfelder, Faul & Buchner, 1996).

Procedure. Participants were informed that this was a study about informal group communication, and were asked to recall a situation in which they worked in a group of at least four students on a course assignment. Furthermore, participants were asked to recall and write a short description of an incident in which a group member shared with them either positive or negative evaluative information (depending on condition) about another group member's competence. Five participants (one in the positive gossip condition) were unable to remember such an incident, and were directed to the end of the survey. The remaining participants (85 in the positive and 93 in the negative gossip condition) subsequently completed measures on self-relevant value of gossip.

Measures. In our measures, we referred to the gossiper as "the group mate who gave you the information" and to the gossip target as "X". The response format for all measures was a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). To measure the self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value of received gossip

information, we developed a three-dimensional scale in accordance with self-motives conceptualizations (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Gregg, Hepper, & Sedikides, 2011).
We measured *self-improvement value* of the received gossip with four items, e.g. "The information I received made me think that I can learn a lot from X in this group assignment" (α = .88), *self-promotion value* with eight items, e. g. "The information I received made me feel that I am doing well compared to X in the group assignment" (α = .93), and *self-protection concern* with four items, e. g. "The information I received made me feel that I must protect my image in the group" (α = .91).

Results

Confirmatory factor analyses. To assess whether the three self-motives underlying valuation of gossip are distinct constructs, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses. We first tested a model with the three intended constructs (self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection). The fit statistics, χ^2 (101) = 313, $p < .001$, CFI = .95, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .10, indicated a good model fit (cf. Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). To further evaluate the discriminant validity of our measures, we tested two alternative models. First, self-promotion and self-protection were grouped into one factor, whereas the self-improvement factor remained unchanged ($\Delta\chi^2$ (2) = 606, $p < .001$, CFI = .82, SRMR = .16, RMSEA = .19). Second, all items were loaded on one factor ($\Delta\chi^2$ (3) = 1006, $p < .001$, CFI = .69, SRMR = .19, RMSEA = .25). The fit statistics for both alternative models were worse than for the hypothesized model.

Manipulation check. Participants wrote down descriptions of the received gossip, which were categorized as containing positive or negative gossip by the first author (blind to condition). A second coder, blind to gossip condition and hypotheses, coded a subset of 75 stories (34 in the positive condition). All stories (100%) were coded as matching the condition by both coders. These results suggest that the manipulation of gossip valence was

successful. Furthermore, to examine whether gossip stories were competence-related, the content of the gossip was coded into four categories (ability, effort, both ability and effort, or neither). Of the stories, 27.5% were coded as ability-related gossip, 48.3% as effort-related gossip, 21.9 % as both effort and ability-related gossip, and 2.2 % did not contain any competence-related gossip. A second coder categorized a subset of 75 stories, with an agreement of .93 (Cohen's Kappa). Therefore almost all gossip incidents were, as intended, competence-related. The four participants that did not explicitly refer to competence were retained in the analyses, but dropping them did not alter conclusions. The content of gossip stories did not moderate the effect of gossip valence on any of the self-motives underlying gossip valuation, as shown by a MANOVA: there was no significant effect of gossip content, $\lambda = .96$, F (6, 332) = 0.99, ns, and no significant interaction effect between gossip valence and gossip content, $\lambda = .98$, F (6, 332) = 0.55, ns.

Descriptive statistics. Table 3.1 presents means, standard deviations, and Pearson zero order correlations between variables included in Study 3.1. In line with our conceptualization, the relatively low magnitude of the inter-correlations between self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value of received gossip indicate that the hypothesized constructs represent distinct self-evaluation motives in valuing gossip ($-.23 < r < .35$).

Hypotheses testing. To assess the effect of gossip valence on the self-evaluation value of received gossip, we conducted a MANOVA with gossip valence as an independent variable and the measures of self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value as three dependent variables, showing a significant multivariate effect of gossip valence, $\lambda = .44$, F (3, 174) = 73.89, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .56$. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs showed that the self-

Table 3.1. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations for variables in Study 3.1.

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	1	2	3
1 self-improvement value	3.60 [3.38; 3.81]	1.45	-		
2 self-promotion value	3.63 [3.42; 3.84]	1.41	-.23**	-	
3 self-protection concern	3.47 [3.26; 3.69]	1.47	-.04	.35**	-

$N = 178$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; 95% confidence intervals are given between brackets.

improvement value of gossip was higher for positive gossip (M = 4.55, SD = 1.17), compared to negative gossip (M = 2.72, SD = 1.08), F (1, 176) = 149.21, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .39$, supporting hypothesis 1a. The self-promotion value of gossip was higher for negative gossip (M = 4.35, SD = 1.28), compared to positive gossip (M = 2.83, SD = 1.09), F (1, 176) = 71.69, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$, which supports hypothesis 2a. Finally, the self-protection concern was higher for negative gossip (M = 3.75, SD = 1.47), compared to positive gossip (M = 3.17, SD = 1.41), F (1, 176) = 7.22, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, supporting hypothesis 3a.

Because there is some debate about potential gender effects in gossip behavior (e.g., Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010; Nevo et al., 1994) we explored whether participant gender had any effects. A MANOVA with gender and gossip valence as predictors showed no multivariate interaction effect on the self-relevant value of gossip, λ = .97, F (3, 170) = 1.38, ns, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, suggesting that gender did not moderate the effect of gossip valence; however, a univariate effect of gender indicated that self-promotion value was higher for men (M = 3.80, SD = 1.30) than for women (M = 3.31, SD = 1.50), F (1, 172) = 9.30, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. No other effects were significant (all $F < 2$; all $p > .20$).

Discussion

Findings showed that receiving positive gossip had self-improvement value for individuals, whereas negative gossip had self-promotion value. Moreover, negative gossip significantly increased self-protection concerns, providing initial support for our expectations. In addition, we found that men perceive higher self-promotion value of gossip than women. To replicate these results, and to test whether the self-evaluation value of received gossip mediates the relationships between gossip valence and recipients' self-conscious emotions we conducted an experimental scenario study. In Study 3.2 we also manipulated achievement goals, to examine whether achievement goals influence responses to receiving positive vs. negative gossip.

Study 3.2

Method

Design and participants. One hundred twenty-two undergraduates at a Dutch university (53 female, 6 not specified), with mean age of 21.18 (*SD* = 2.20), participated in this laboratory study in exchange for course credit or 4 Euros. The study had a 2 (gossip valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (achievement goal: mastery vs. performance) between-subjects factorial design[8]; participants were randomly assigned to conditions. For a medium effect size with 4 groups at power .80 and α =.05, about 120 participants are needed (GPOWER, Erdfelder, et al., 1996).

Procedure. Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were seated in separate cubicles, and informed that they would participate in a study about informal communication in the workplace. The experiment began with the presentation of a scenario, in which a sales agent described the job, from a first-person perspective. Participants were assigned the role of the sales agent and asked to imagine that they had written the presented text.

The achievement goal manipulation consisted of two coherent parts (cf. Sijbom, Janssen, & Van Yperen, 2014). First, the achievement climate in the sales department differed between the performance and mastery goal conditions. In the performance goal condition, the department had a strong competitive climate ("…as an employee, I feel encouraged to continuously demonstrate my competencies by outperforming my co-

[8] The original design of the study also included a control condition for the achievement goal manipulation. In this condition, instructions emphasized to "do your best" and success was defined as "using your knowledge, skills, and abilities." This control condition was dropped for two reasons. First, the pattern of means was inconsistent and hard to interpret: some means fell between the mastery and performance condition (e.g., for fear), and other means were similar to the mastery condition (e.g., for self-protection and self-improvement). Second, in retrospect, the definition of success in the control condition contained elements of mastery goals (i.e., using one's skills and abilities). Full details about the findings in the control condition may be obtained from the first author.

workers"); in the mastery goal condition, the department had a strong developmental climate ("…as an employee, I feel encouraged to continuously develop my competencies by acquiring new sales skills and knowledge"). Second, participants were assigned an achievement goal consistent with the department climate. Specifically, in the performance goal condition, participants' goal was to perform better than other colleagues ("…my personal goal is to demonstrate my sales abilities and communication skills, and to perform better than my colleagues do"). In contrast, in the mastery goal condition, participants' goal was to perform better than before ("…my personal goal is to improve my sales abilities and communication skills, and to perform better than I did before"). Next, to help participants internalize their assigned achievement goal, they were instructed to write a paragraph of 5-10 sentences from the perspective of the sales agent, in which they explain why pursuing their assigned goal was important.

The scenario continued with the gossip valence manipulation. Participants were asked to imagine that they were chatting with Sam, a fellow sales representative. During their chat, Sam tells gossip about a colleague, called Alex. That is, participants received gossip information from Sam that contained competence-related evaluations about the target, framed positively (Alex did very well at the performance appraisal) or negatively (Alex did very badly at the performance appraisal). Next, participants completed the manipulation checks and dependent measures, were debriefed, compensated and thanked for their participation.

Measures. For all dependent measures we used 7-point Likert response scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Participants indicated to what extent they, as a sales agent, had a mastery goal ("At my job, my goal is to do better than I did before"), and to what extent they had a performance goal ("At my job, my goal is to do better than others"). Participants also indicated to what extent the gossip they received from their co-worker in the scenario was positive ("Sam heard

that Alex did well at the performance appraisal") or negative ("Sam heard that Alex did poorly at the performance appraisal").

Self-evaluation value of received gossip was assessed as in Study 3.1 (*Self-improvement value:* α = .90; *Self-promotion value*: α = .95; *Self-protection concern*: α = .87).

Alertness, pride, and fear were measured using the PANAS-X scale (Watson & Clark, 1994). Specifically, after reading the sentence stem "The information I received makes me feel… ," participants indicated to what extent the received gossip information made them feel "alert", "attentive", "focused" (alertness, α = .76), "proud", "strong", "confident", "bold" (pride, α = .82), and "afraid", "scared", "nervous" (fear, α = .92).

Results

Manipulation checks. First, we examined the paragraph that participants wrote to internalize their goal. The text was categorized as corresponding to the mastery or the performance goal by the first author (blind to conditions). All participants referred to the goal assigned to them. However, five participants (4.1 %) also mentioned elements that correspond to the other achievement goal. A second coder, who was blind to the conditions and hypotheses, coded participants' descriptions of their assigned goal, with an agreement of .92 (Cohen's Kappa).

Second, T-tests indicated that participants in the mastery condition scored marginally higher than participants in the performance condition on the mastery goal check, t (120) = 1.90, p = .059 (M_{mastery} = 6.33, SD = .85; $M_{\text{performance}}$ = 5.97, SD = 1.21), and lower on the performance goal check, t (120) = -7.06, p < .001 (M_{mastery} = 4.80, SD = 1.44; $M_{\text{performance}}$ = 6.36, SD = .93). These results indicate that the achievement goal manipulation was overall successful.

T-tests indicated that participants in the positive gossip condition scored higher than participants in the negative condition on the positive gossip check, t (120) = 15.50, p < .001

($M_{positive}$ = 6.24, *SD* = 1.12; $M_{negative}$ = 2.25, *SD* = 1.67), and lower on the negative gossip check, *t* (120) = -21.49, *p* < .001 ($M_{positive}$ = 1.34, *SD* = .65, $M_{negative}$ = 5.98, *SD* = 1.56). These results indicate that the gossip valence manipulation was successful.

Outlier analysis. Before further analysis, we examined influential observations. Four participants had Cook's distance scores higher than 0.07 on the self-relevant gossip value measures, which is well above the cut-off point of 0.032 for our sample (Bollen & Jackman, 1990), and were excluded from the analysis. The results are thus based on data from 118 participants.

Descriptive statistics. Table 3.2 presents means, standard deviations, and Pearson zero-order correlations for the variables included in Study 3.2.

Table 3.2. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations for variables in Study 3.2.

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 self-improvement value	4.12 [3.83; 4.41]	1.60	-					
2 self-promotion value	3.92 [3.66; 4.18]	1.43	-.59**	-				
3 self-protection concern	4.62 [4.38; 4.85]	1.29	-.15	.13	-			
4 alertness	5.14 [4.97; 5.32]	.95	-.09	.19*	.28**	-		
5 pride	3.63 [3.40; 3.86]	1.26	-.33**	.62**	-.05	.15	-	
6 fear	3.43 [3.17; 3.70]	1.46	.18*	-.28**	.42*	.21*	-.27**	-

N = 118; *. *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; 95% confidence intervals are given between brackets.

Hypotheses testing. To test our hypotheses we employed a bootstrapping procedure for assessing indirect and conditional effects (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). We conducted three regression analyses with gossip valence as independent variable, achievement goal as moderator, the motives underlying the self-relevant value of gossip as mediators, and emotions as dependent variables (see Figure 3.1). For each of the following models 5000 bootstrap samples were used. Results are shown in Table 3.3.

We predicted that self-improvement mediates the effect of gossip valence on alertness, and that gossip (irrespective of valence) has higher self-improvement value for individuals with salient mastery goals compared to individuals with salient performance

goals. Self-improvement value was higher in the positive gossip condition (M = 5.21, SD = 1.11) than in the negative gossip condition (M = 2.95, SD = 1.17), b = 1.13, p < .001, confirming hypothesis 1a. Self-improvement value was higher in the mastery (M = 4.28, SD = 1.60) than in the performance goal condition (M = 3.96, SD = 1.60), although this effect was marginally significant, b = -.17, p = .09, which provides some support for Hypothesis 4. Self-improvement was unrelated to alertness, b = .01, ns. Consequently, the indirect effect of gossip valence on alertness through self-improvement was not significant, either in the mastery condition (*indirect effect* = .02, 95% CI [-.17; .22]) or in the performance condition (*indirect effect* = .01, 95% CI [-.16; .20]), disconfirming hypothesis 1b.

We expected self-promotion value of gossip to mediate the relation between gossip valence and pride, and achievement goal to moderate this indirect effect. In line with hypothesis 2a, self-promotion value was higher in the negative (M = 5.12, SD = .88) than in the positive gossip condition (M = 2.80, SD = .80), b = -1.15, p < .001. However, there was no main effect of achievement goal on self-promotion, b = -.06, ns, and no interaction effect, b = -.03, ns, which disconfirms hypotheses 5a and 5b. Self-promotion was related to pride, b = .68, p < .001, and self-promotion mediated the negative relationship between gossip valence and pride, supporting hypothesis 2b. This indirect effect was similar in the mastery condition (*indirect effect* = -.77, 95% CI [-1.04; -.53]), and performance condition (*indirect effect* = -.82, 95% CI [-1.13; -.56]).

Self-protection concern was hypothesized to mediate the relationship between gossip valence and fear, and achievement goal was expected to moderate this indirect effect. As predicted by hypothesis 3a, self-protection concern was higher in the negative (M = 4.88, SD = 1.17) than in the positive gossip condition (M = 4.37, SD = 1.36), b = -.25, p < .05. A main effect of achievement goal, b = .22, p < .05, showed that self-protection concern was higher in the performance (M = 4.85, SD = 1.26) than in the mastery goal condition (M = 4.38, SD =

1.29). In line with hypothesis 6a, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $b = .31$, $p < .01$, showing that self-protection concern was high in the negative gossip condition regardless of achievement goal ($M_{mastery} = 4.97$, $SD = .98$; $M_{performance} = 4.79$, $SD = 1.35$), and was lower in the positive gossip condition only for participants with a mastery goal ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.32$) but not for participants with a performance goal ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.19$). Furthermore, self-protection concern was related to fear, $b = .54$, $p < .001$. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 6b, there was a negative indirect effect of gossip valence on fear through self-protection concern when participants had a mastery goal (*indirect effect* = -.31, 95% CI [-.55; -.14]), but not when they had a performance goal (*indirect effect* = .03, 95% CI [-.14; .21]). In sum, negative as compared to positive gossip raised higher self-protection concerns and fear among individuals with salient mastery goals; among individuals with salient performance goals, however, self-protection concerns were high irrespective of gossip valence.

As in Study 3.1, we also examined whether participant gender moderated the effects documented above. Two MANOVAs were performed with gender, achievement goal and gossip valence as predictors, and self-evaluative value and emotions as dependent variables, respectively. These analyses revealed no main effects of gender, no two-way interactions between gender and achievement goal, and no three-way interactions, all $F < 2.10$; all $p > .10$. However, the multivariate interaction between gender and gossip valence was marginally significant for self-evaluative value of gossip, $\lambda = .94$, F (3, 112) = 2.39, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and significant for emotions, $\lambda = .89$, F (3, 112) = 4.20, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. These effects were further explored in univariate ANOVAs.

The gender by gossip valence interaction was marginally significant for self-promotion value of gossip, F (1, 114) = 3.08, $p = .08$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, revealing a valence effect stronger for women ($M_{positive} = 2.70$; $M_{negative} = 5.29$, F (1, 114) = 134.08, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .54$)

than for men ($M_{positive}$ = 2.89; $M_{negative}$ = 4.94, F (1, 114) = 92.39, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .44$). This same effect was observed for the related emotion of pride, F (1, 114) = 5.81, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, were valence effects were stronger for women ($M_{positive}$ = 2.86; $M_{negative}$ = 4.50, F (1, 114) = 29.69, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$) than for men ($M_{positive}$ = 3.29; $M_{negative}$ = 3.93, F (1, 114) = 4.95, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$). These results are inconsistent with those of Study 3.1, in which men (regardless of valence) perceived higher self-promotion value than women.

Further, the interaction effect on self-protection was marginally significant, F (1, 114) = 3.19, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, showing that negative gossip only increased self-protection concerns for women ($M_{positive}$ = 4.30; $M_{negative}$ = 5.24, F (1, 114) = 7.70, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$) but not for men ($M_{positive}$ = 4.43; $M_{negative}$ = 4.54, F (1, 114) = 0.74, ns). Moreover, as shown by a marginally significant interaction effect, F (1, 114) = 2.65, $p = .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, women experienced equally high fear regardless of gossip valence ($M_{positive}$ = 3.77; $M_{negative}$ = 3.58, F (1, 114) = 0.25, ns), whereas men experienced lower fear in the negative gossip condition ($M_{positive}$ = 3.70; $M_{negative}$ = 2.66, F (1, 114) = 8.35, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$).

Finally, a marginally significant interaction effect, F (1, 114) = 3.80, $p = .053$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, showed that negative gossip increased alertness for women ($M_{positive}$ = 4.91; $M_{negative}$ = 5.54, F (1, 114) = 6.32, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$), whereas for men alertness was equally high regardless of gossip valence ($M_{positive}$ = 5.09; $M_{negative}$ = 5.04, F (1, 114) = 0.35, ns).

Discussion

Consistent with Study 3.1, we found support for our prediction that positive gossip has self-improvement value, whereas negative gossip has self-promotion value, but also raises self-protection concerns. These results clearly indicate that gossip has self-evaluative functions for receivers. Moreover, negative gossip elicited pride due to its self-promotion value, and fear due to increased self-protection concerns. However, we found no support for the mediating role of self-improvement in the relation between gossip valence and alertness.

Table 3.3. Moderated mediation analysis for Study 3.2.

Mediator Variable Models

	Self-improvement			Self-promotion			Self-protection		
	B	*t*	CI	*b*	*t*	CI	*b*	*t*	CI
Gossip valence	1.13***	10.79	.92; 1.33	-1.15***	-14.80	-1.30; -1.00	-.25*	-2.28	-48; -.03
Achievement goal	-.17	-1.70	-.38; .02	-.06	-.84	-.22; 08	.22*	2.01	.003; .45
Gossip valence * achievement goal	-.05	-0.52	-.26; .15	-.03	-.45	-.18; .11	.31**	2.80	.09; .53

Dependent Variable Models

	Alertness			Pride			Fear		
Gossip valence	-.16	-1.29	-.40; .08	.24	1.55	-.06;.54	.44***	3.78	.21; .68
Self-improvement	.01	.22	-.13; .17						
Self-promotion				.68***	6.35	.47; .90			
Self-protection							.54***	5.95	.36; .72
				Conditional indirect effect					
Mastery goal	.02		-.17; .22	-.77		-1.04; -.53	-.31		-.55; -.14
Performance goal	.01		-.16; .20	-.82		-1.13; -.56	.03		-.14; .21

N = 118; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; Gossip valence was coded -1 for negative condition and 1 for positive condition; achievement goal was coded as -1 for mastery goal and 1 for performance goal; CI = 95% confidence interval.

We further found that mastery goals led to marginally higher self-improvement value of gossip. Achievement goals were unrelated to self-promotion value of received gossip, but were related to self-protection concerns: individuals with performance goals had higher self-protection concerns compared to individuals with mastery goals. Furthermore, for individuals with performance goals self-protection concern was high irrespective of gossip valence, presumably because negative gossip reveals threats for the self, while positive gossip interferes with their goal to outperform others. For individuals with mastery goals negative gossip increased self-protection concerns and fear compared to positive gossip, presumably because negative but not positive gossip signals self-threats for individuals with mastery goals.

Exploratory analyses showed that valence effects on self-promotion value, pride, self-protection concern, and alertness were stronger for women than for men. For men, negative gossip elicited less fear than positive gossip, whereas for women there was no valence effect. We propose an interpretation of these effects in the General Discussion.

General Discussion

Self-evaluation value of gossip

In line with the view that positive gossip provides success stories which facilitate instructive social comparisons, we showed that compared to negative gossip, positive gossip is more valuable for self-improvement. Although the cultural learning view of gossip (Baumeister et al., 2004) posits that negative gossip has higher learning value, because information about violated norms and possible consequences is more adaptive for individuals, our results indicate that individuals perceive higher self-improvement value of positive than of negative gossip. Litman and Pezzo (2005) document receivers' preference for positive gossip, but attribute it to the general bias against negative gossip, which is socially undesirable. According to our findings, an additional reason may be that people value

receiving positive gossip because it facilitates self-improvement: competence-related positive gossip about others contains lessons about how to improve one's own competence. However, the particular content of gossip might moderate its self-improvement value. Gossip about norm compliance might be less instructive than gossip about norm violations when individuals learn specific social norms (Baumeister et al., 2004). Thus, the gossip content and other situational contingencies may operate as boundary conditions on the self-improvement value of positive and negative gossip.

The self-improvement motive prompts individuals to make persistent efforts and master challenges (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000). Accordingly, we predicted that the self-improvement value of positive gossip would increase alertness. However, alertness was high for both positive and negative gossip (*M* around 5 on a 7-point scale), which suggests that alertness is a generic response to self-relevant information. Positive gossip receivers might become alert in preparation for self-improving actions, while negative gossip receivers might become alert due to the direct positive and negative implications gossip may have for themselves.

Our results further showed that negative gossip had self-promotion value, because it provides individuals with social comparison information that justifies self-promoting judgments, which result in feelings of pride. Contrary to lay perceptions, most negative gossip is not intended to hurt the target, but to please the gossiper and receiver (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994), by fostering self-promotion and positive affect for its participants (cf. Robins & Beer, 2001). We also showed that negative gossip elicited self-protection concerns, which were associated with anxiety. Social comparisons enable individuals to draw analogies between themselves and others. Negative gossip makes people concerned that their reputation may be at risk, as they may personally become targets of negative gossip in the future, which generates fear. Given that fear increases systematic information processing, functional for regaining order and

predictability (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2012), fear represents an adaptive response to negative gossip threats. Fear urges individuals to take action to preserve their self-system integrity, and to defend themselves against potential negative outcomes (Green, Sedikides, Pinter, & Van Tongeren, 2009).

Achievement Goals

Our study revealed that compared to participants with salient performance goals, participants with mastery goals perceived marginally higher self-improvement value of the received gossip. Given that mastery goals are dominant in student populations (Elliot & Church, 1997), we could attribute the marginality of this effect to the characteristics of our student sample, where high chronic mastery goals might have generated self-improvement tendencies for participants in both goal conditions.

Contrary to our expectations, the self-promotion value of gossip was similar among individuals with salient mastery and performance goals. Negative gossip elicited relatively high self-promotion value for both participants with mastery and performance goals (*M* around 5 on a 7-point scale). Thus, irrespective of receivers' goal, negative gossip generated positive self-regard, suggesting that positive self-regard is a fundamental human need. Moreover, in line with achievement goal conceptualizations, participants in the performance goal condition experienced overall higher self-protection concerns compared to participants in the mastery goal condition, because they feel more easily threatened. Participants with salient performance goals experienced self-protection concerns in response to both positive and negative gossip. By defining their competence relative to others, individuals who pursue performance goals feel threatened by positive gossip because rivals' success translates to their own failure (cf. Poortvliet & Giebels, 2012). Moreover, similarly to individuals with mastery goals, individuals with performance goals feel threatened by negative gossip because it

suggests that their social environment is hostile and they might become negative gossip targets themselves.

Gender

Our exploratory analyses in Study 3.2 (but not in Study 3.1) suggest that women are generally more sensitive to the valence of received gossip than men. As compared to men, women responded more strongly to the valence of gossip in terms of evoked self-promotion value, pride, self-protection concern, and alertness, whereas for men gossip valence generated differential responses on fear. These findings suggest that cues from their social environment facilitated downward social comparisons and also revealed potential threats for women; men were less sensitive to the threat of a malignant social environment in which they may become targets of negative gossip. The moderating effect of gender may reflect that women are more relational and interdependent than men, and therefore more sensitive to social cues (Weber & Hertel, 2007). As such, women may be more sensitive than men to information revealing a benign or malignant social environment, and may also derive their self-views to a higher extent from it. The higher impact of received gossip on women's self evaluations may partly explain why gossip is stereotypically seen as a female behavior (Michelson et al., 2010): if receiving gossip is more important for the self-evaluation of women than that of men, women perhaps are more interested in receiving (both positive and negative) gossip. Future research may examine this possibility.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The present study contributes to self-evaluation motives research, by providing empirical evidence of the self-evaluative functions that gossip serves for receivers. Consistent with the idea that people include representations of others in the self-concept (Brown, 1998), we showed that receiving competence-related gossip is relevant for self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection. Social comparison is an intrinsic part of self-evaluation

(Festinger, 1954); positive and negative competence-related gossip about others sets in motion social comparison processes (Wert & Salovey, 2004), which make self-evaluation motives salient. Self-evaluation depends on available information and on the ratio between information value and its emotional cost (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000). Gossip conveniently provides individuals with indirect social comparison information about relevant others, which allows individuals to avoid threat or embarrassment by directly encountering the target (Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Thus, receivers value gossip highly due to its self-evaluative functions, which elicit adaptive self-conscious emotions. Moreover, receivers' achievement goals influence their self-evaluations and emotional reactions to competence-related gossip.

By showing that receiving gossip plays an important role in self-evaluation, the present findings help explain why gossip is universal among humans. Our research might shift the prevailing negative perception of gossip (Baumeister et al., 2004, Foster, 2004), and it might complement research that documents its social control functions. We demonstrate that besides emotional catharsis and social control, gossip provides an essential resource for self-evaluation.

Gossip is omnipresent in organizations, where it has a paradoxical reputation. On the one hand, gossip is perceived as a threat to the organization and its employees (Michelson et al., 2010). Social norms explicitly instruct people to avoid gossip, and prescribe punishments for those who gossip (Dunbar, 2004; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). On the other hand, due to its social control functions, managers often encourage gossip, but call it "mutual monitoring" (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). At any rate, employees do gossip fervently about coworkers' achievements and failures. Our results suggest that negative and positive gossip are valuable and accessible sources of information, which can help employees compare with others in their organization, and evaluate their own competence or performance. An upward

comparison may teach employees how to improve, while a downward comparison can be flattering or reveal threats for the self. Furthermore, achievement goals, often explicitly advocated by human resource policies, influence how people value competence-related gossip. Thus, our research may help managers and employees understand why people value gossip related to their achievement domain, and have certain emotional reactions to the received gossip.

Limitations and Future Research

First, we believe that gossip satisfies fundamental human needs, thus our results should be replicable within the general adult population. However, the participants of our studies were students. It remains for future research to replicate our findings using more diverse samples. Second, we used only explicit self-report measures for self-evaluation value of gossip, which we constructed in line with conceptualizations of self-evaluation motives. Future research could use other measures to assess the implicit self-evaluative functions of received gossip. Third, we manipulated gossip valence and achievement goals so that participants recalled or received either positive or negative gossip, and had either a mastery or performance goal. However, people may receive messages that contain both positive and negative gossip, and may hold a combination of achievement goals. Therefore, our results should be interpreted keeping these aspects in mind. Fourth, the present study focused on the self-relevant value of passively received gossip. However, in conversation people are rarely either gossip senders or receivers, but rather exchange roles dynamically. Future work should investigate how individuals value gossip when they seek gossip actively, and whether, in turn, they become gossip senders.

Conclusion

The present research shows that individuals are interested in receiving gossip due to its self-evaluative functions. Gossip recipients tend to use positive and negative gossip

information in order to improve, promote, and protect the self. Furthermore, positive and negative gossip elicits self-conscious emotions that are congruent with the specific self-evaluation motives underlying gossip valuation. Finally, achievement goals influence individuals' self-evaluations and emotional reactions to the received gossip. In all, this study suggests that one reason why gossip is so prevalent in all walks of life is that receiving gossip serves important self-evaluative functions for individuals.

Chapter 4

Emotional and behavioral responses to gossip about the self

Abstract:

Using cognitive appraisal theory, we investigated the emotions and behavioral intentions of people who hear performance-related gossip about themselves in the workplace. Results of two scenario studies (N_1 = 226, N_2 = 204) and a critical incident study (N = 240) showed that positive gossip made targets feel happy with themselves and happy with the gossiper, which predicted intentions to affiliate with the gossiper. Negative gossip generated self-directed blame, especially for targets with low core self-evaluations, which predicted repair intentions. Negative gossip also generated other-directed blame, especially for targets with high reputational concerns, which predicted retaliation intentions against the gossiper. Moreover, this pattern of emotional reactions to self-relevant gossip was found to be unique and different from emotional reactions to self-relevant feedback. These results show that self-directed and other-directed emotions predict how people intend to behaviorally react to gossip about themselves.

Chapter 4: Emotional and behavioral responses to gossip about the self

People talk about others abundantly, and informal communication about others plays a pivotal role in the informal communication network in the workplace (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Research suggests that up to 70% of our daily conversations contain positive or negative informal evaluations about someone who is not present (Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997), a type of interpersonal communication known as gossip (Foster, 2004). Accordingly, gossip has been portrayed as intrinsic to human nature and essential for group functioning (Dunbar, 2004). For example, the threat of becoming a gossip target has been found to deter self-serving behavior and increase group-serving behavior in social dilemma situations (e.g. Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012).

Although gossip is not intended to be directly heard by the *gossip targets* (i.e. people whom gossip is about; Foster, 2004), gossip does occasionally leak out of the typically closed gossip circle and reaches the target. As gossip is evaluative in nature and can damage or boost people's self-image and reputation (Burt, 2008; Smith & Collins, 2009), it may have profound implications for its targets. Negative gossip represents a judgment about undesirable behaviors or characteristics, which may therefore reduce colleagues' trust and willingness to cooperate with the target (e.g., Beersma & van Kleef, 2011; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007). In contrast, positive gossip may benefit the target, because it signals support and social inclusion in the workgroup (Burt, 2008, Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012; Merry, 1984). Despite these profound consequences, empirical research has not yet clarified how employees react when they actually hear gossip about themselves. Thus, although we know that the *threat* of gossip may increase pro-group behavior, we do not know the consequences of actually *being* a gossip target.

In this contribution, we study the emotional and behavioral responses to hearing performance-related positive or negative gossip about oneself. Using cognitive appraisal theory (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus; 1991, Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), we examine the role of gossip

valence (positive *vs* negative) in shaping gossip targets' self-directed and other-directed emotions. Specifically, we argue that employees who are confronted with negative gossip about themselves react with self-directed blame (e.g., guilt) and/or other-directed blame (e.g., anger), whereas those confronted with positive gossip about themselves react with self-directed happiness (e.g., pride) and/or other-directed happiness (e.g., liking). These distinct emotions are likely to be associated with specific behavioral intentions: self-directed blame with repair, other-directed blame with retaliation, and other-directed happiness with affiliation. Thus, becoming the target of especially negative gossip may, on the one hand, stimulate group-serving behavior in the form of repair intentions, but it may also trigger more negative behaviors such as retaliation.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. We first investigate what emotional reactions people have to gossip about themselves. We show that both self-directed and other-directed emotional reactions to positive and negative gossip are possible. Second, we clarify what specific behavioral intentions might be activated by the self-directed and other-directed emotions that gossip targets experience. Third, we investigate how being the target of (informal) positive and negative gossip may lead to different responses than receiving positive and negative (formal) performance feedback. Given that gossiping is more voluntary and spontaneous than providing (formal) feedback, and formal feedback may be more credible than gossip, we propose and show that being the target of gossip induces emotional reactions that are unique and different from the emotional reactions employees experience when they receive evaluative feedback information about the self. Fourth, we identify two dispositional traits that moderate the effect of gossip valence on emotions and behavioral intentions. Because being the target of gossip may arouse both self-directed and other-directed emotions, and because the behavioral consequences are quite different, it is important to understand when self- and other-directed emotional responses are more likely.

Theoretical Background

Because people are emotionally sensitive to hearing evaluations about their attributes or performance (Arkin & Appelman, 1983; Frijda, 1988), gossip about the self is likely to cause strong emotional reactions. According to cognitive appraisal theory, distinct emotions are shaped by individuals' interpretations of relevant positive or negative events (e.g., Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Roseman, 1996; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). As such, we categorize gossip targets' emotions according to gossip valence. Positive gossip may help targets maintain a positive image of the self and is likely to generate positive emotions, whereas negative gossip may threaten or harm the self and is likely to generate negative emotions (Arkin & Appelman, 1983; Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

Furthermore, discrete emotions are triggered by different agency appraisals, depending on whether the self or another person is held responsible for causing the event and its outcomes (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Roseman, 1996; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Wegge, Van Dick, Fisher, West, & Dawson, 2006). Accordingly, targets who appraise a gossip event as being caused by themselves may experience self-directed negative emotions (shame and guilt) or self-directed positive emotions (pride; Tracy & Robins, 2004), whereas targets who hold the gossiper accountable for the gossip may experience either other-directed negative emotions (anger) or other-directed positive emotions (liking; Roseman, 1996). Because emotions serve an important coordination role in preparing behavioral responses to positive or negative events (Lazarus, 1991), we expect that gossip targets' emotions trigger behavioral intentions that are consistent with the underlying valence (positive *vs* negative) and agency appraisals (self *vs* other) of the gossip incident.

Negative emotional reactions and behavioral intentions

Negative gossip entails an unfavorable evaluation (Foster, 2004), which targets may blame on themselves or on the gossiper, depending on their agency appraisals. Targets of

negative gossip who believe they themselves are responsible for being criticized, because they have harmed or disappointed others, are likely to experience self-directed blame (i.e. guilt and shame; Johnson & Connelly, 2014; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Guilt comes from transgressing a social or moral standard, while shame stems from failure to live up to an ego ideal (e.g., Frijda et al., 1989; Roseman, 1996; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Accordingly, because negative gossip raises targets' awareness of their inadequate attributes or behavior (e.g. substandard performance, task failure, avoiding responsibilities; Gruenewald, Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2007), which disappointed others or themselves, we hypothesize that negative gossip leads to higher self-directed blame than positive gossip (hypothesis 1a).

Self-directed blame induces tension, regret, and a tendency to alter the situation (Solomon, 1993), which makes individuals less likely to repeat the negative behavior and more likely to repair the harm they caused (Frijda et al., 1989). Indeed, research suggests that individuals who have violated norms or underperformed at work engage in compensatory behavior to eliminate their self-directed blame and repair their social relations (Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009). Therefore, and in accordance with the social control function of gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; 2012; Feinberg et al., 2012; Sommerfeld et al., 2007), we expect that negative (relative to positive) gossip triggers repair intentions, and that this effect is mediated by self-directed blame (hypothesis 1b).

Self-directed blame may not be the only emotional reaction to negative gossip. Negative gossip informs targets that the gossipers criticized them or exposed their weaknesses to co-workers. Targets may perceive negative gossip about themselves as offensive and unfair and appraise the gossiper as responsible for harming them (Lazarus, 1991; Solomon, 1993). Gossipers may indeed abusively self-enhance at the expense of gossip targets (Wert & Salovey, 2004), by damaging their reputation (Burt, 2008), restraining their power (Ogasawara, 1988), or decreasing their sexual attractiveness (Massar, Buunk, & Rempt,

2012). Targets' appraisal that the gossiper intentionally harmed them is likely to generate other-directed blame, or anger (Lazarus, 1991). Because targets are unlikely to perceive that their interests are violated in case of positive gossip, we hypothesize that targets who overhear negative gossip about themselves experience higher other-directed blame than targets of positive gossip (hypothesis 2a).

Because people strive for equitable relations with co-workers (Adams, 1965), experiencing unfair treatment causes distress and desire for revenge (Lazarus, 1991). Anger facilitates punishing gossipers (Lazarus, 1991) and justifies counter-attacks against offenders (Weiner, Graham, & Chandler, 1982). Thus, we hypothesize that negative (relative to positive) gossip leads to retaliation intentions against the gossiper, and that this relation is mediated by other-directed blame (hypothesis 2b).

Positive emotional reactions and behavioral intentions

Positive gossip entails a favorable evaluation (Foster, 2004). Individuals are likely to be pleased with positive gossip about themselves because they need positive evaluations from others to function well (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Because people are motivated to believe that they were favorably evaluated due to their own merit (Kunda, 1990), positive gossip is likely to result in self-directed positive emotions (such as pride; see Lazarus, 1991; Tracy & Robins, 2004; Tracy, Shariff, & Cheng, 2010; Solomon, 1993). Although others' praise can appear as ingratiating (Appelbaum & Hughes, 1998), positive gossip reaches targets indirectly and unintentionally, allowing targets to judge others' evaluation as sincere, and derive self-directed happiness from it. Because pride is an unlikely response to negative gossip, we expect that positive gossip leads to higher self-directed happiness than negative gossip (hypothesis 3).

Pride makes people feel that they deserve high status and group acceptance, and it also signals to others their high personal value (Tracy et al., 2010). However, expressions of pride

are likely to manifest subtly in interpersonal interaction. Lazarus (1991) notes that it is difficult to specify a clear action tendency for pride, because self-praise is socially undesirable. Therefore, we do not predict specific behavioral intentions for positive gossip targets who feel pride.

Because targets might recognize the active role gossipers play in elevating their reputation (Burt, 2008; Sommerfeld et al., 2007), positive gossip may also generate happiness with the gossiper. Positive gossip creates "cost free social rewards" (Merry, 1984), and people like others with whom they associate rewards and positive outcomes (Sternberg, 1987). Moreover, behaviors that imply warmth and affiliation, such as positive gossip, tend to elicit reciprocal responses from others (Kiesler, 1983). Indeed, a meta-analysis showed that indirect ingratiating behaviors, such as other-enhancement, have strong effects on interpersonal attraction and liking (Gordon, 1996). Because targets are unlikely to perceive negative gossip as praise or as expressions of warmth and affiliation, we expect that targets of positive gossip experience higher other-directed happiness than targets of negative gossip (hypothesis 4a).

Interpersonal liking helps individuals develop trust and establish collaborations due to a feeling of shared social identity (Hogg & Turner, 1985). Because people who are liked are attributed favorable motives (Nicholson, Compeau, & Sethi, 2001), positive gossip targets might think that they have shared values with the gossiper, and will find a trustworthy ally in this person. Thus, we hypothesize that positive (relative to negative) gossip predicts targets' affiliation intentions with the gossiper due to increased liking (i.e., other-directed happiness; hypothesis 4b).

Overview of studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted three studies in which we manipulated the valence of gossip overheard by targets. We focused on performance-related gossip, which often occurs in the workplace or similar achievement environments. Due to gossip's social

control function in groups, studying targets' reactions to performance-related gossip may have important implications for the workplace. In Study 1, hypothesized relationships between gossip valence, emotional reactions, and behavioral intentions were tested in a scenario experiment with a sample of university students. In Study 2, a scenario study among employees, we replicated these relations and additionally explored the differences between being the target of positive and negative gossip, and being the target of positive and negative (formal) performance evaluations. Study 3 was a critical incidents study that additionally examined moderators of the relations between gossip valence and responses of targets.

Study 4.1

Method

Design and participants. Two hundred twenty six economics and business undergraduates at a Dutch university (108 female, M_{age} = 21.76, *SD* = 3.21), participated in exchange of course credit or 4 Euros. Participants were randomly assigned to a positive (*N* = 116) or negative (*N* = 110) gossip condition.

Procedure. Upon arrival at the research laboratory, participants were seated in separate cubicles, and informed that they would participate in research about students' reactions to informal evaluative talk about themselves. Participants read a scenario, and were asked to imagine that they had written it.

Gossip valence manipulation. Participants imagined working on a group assignment and overhearing two classmates talk about them behind their back. Participants were targets of either *positive* or *negative* performance-related gossip: "A said to B that you *are / are not* a good group member and *likes / dislikes* working with you, because your contribution to the assignment is *remarkable / disappointing*. You seem to be very *hardworking / lazy*, since you *always / never* come prepared to the meetings, and choose to do the *most difficult / easiest*

tasks." Next, participants filled in manipulation checks and dependent variable measures, were debriefed, compensated and thanked for participation[9].

Measures

Manipulation checks. Participants were asked to indicate whether the overheard gossip was positive or negative. They could choose between (1) *The information classmate A told classmate B about me is positive* and (2) *The information classmate A told classmate B about me is negative*. Next, participants were asked to summarize the information they overheard.

Dependent measures. For all dependent variables we used 7-point Likert response scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Emotions. Emotions were measured using items from the PANAS-X scale (Watson & Clark, 1994). Specifically, participants indicated to what extent the overheard gossip information made them feel "guilty", "ashamed", "blameworthy," "angry at self" (*self-directed blame,* α = .96), "angry," "hostile," "irritable" (*other-directed blame,* α = .93), "proud," "strong," "bold" (*self-directed happiness,* α = .91). *Other-directed happiness* was measured with 3 items adapted from Wojciszke, Abele, and Baryła (2009): "I like classmate A," "I have warm feelings about classmate A," and "I feel close to classmate A" (α = .93). Confirmatory factor analyses showed that the hypothesized four factor model had a better fit $\chi^2(59) = 234.40$, $p < .001$, CFI = .98, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .11, than a model with two latent factors for positive and negative emotions, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 1004.12$, $p < .001$, CFI = .88, SRMR = .13, RMSEA = .28, and a model with two latent factors for self-directed and other-directed emotions, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 668.75$, $p < .001$, CFI = .90, SRMR = .09, RMSEA = .24.

[9] Initially, this study had a 2 (gossip valence: positive vs. negative) x 3 (achievement goal: mastery vs. performance vs. control) design, to see if reactions to gossip are influenced by achievement goals. We collapsed the analyses across the achievement goal conditions, because no effects of achievement goals were observed.

Behavioral intentions. *Repair intentions* were measured with 3 items developed by Martinescu, Janssen, and Nijstad (2014). Following the introductory phrase "The things classmate A said about me to classmate B would help me…" the specific items were: "Understand how to improve my contribution to the group assignment," "Improve my performance in the group assignment," and "Understand that I can do better in the group assignment" (α = .86). Behavioral intentions regarding the gossiper were measured using two items for *retaliation intentions*: "Talk badly about classmate A" and "Punish classmate A if I can" (α = .74), and two items for *affiliation intentions*: "Team-up with classmate A in the future", "Try to become friends with classmate A" (α = .76). Factor analyses showed that the hypothesized three factor model of repair, retaliation, and affiliation intentions, had a better fit, $\chi^2(11) = 49.90$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .12, than a one-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 281.43$, $p < .001$, CFI = .52, SRMR = .21, RMSEA = .31.

Results

Manipulation checks. One participant in the positive gossip condition and three in the negative condition incorrectly indicated the valence of overheard information. The summaries of overheard information were coded by the first author blind to condition; a second coder, blind to gossip condition and hypotheses, coded a subset of 72 stories (37 in the positive condition). All stories (100%) were coded as matching the condition by both coders, thus the gossip valence manipulation was successful.

Descriptive statistics. Table 4.1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for variables in Study 1. Gossip valence was strongly correlated with all other variables (see zero-order correlations in Table 4.1, below the diagonal), which may generate spurious correlations among emotions and behavioral intentions. Therefore, Table 4.1 also contains partial correlations among these variables, controlling for valence (above the diagonal).

Table 4.1. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations for variables in Study 4.1.

Variable	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Age	21.76	3.21	-	-.01	-	-.21**	.02	.13*	-.09	-.04	-.02	.02
2. Gender	-.04	1.00	-.01	-	-	.06	.03	-.06	.00	.09	-.17**	-.01
3. Gossip valence	.03	1.00	-.10	.01	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Self-blame	2.82	1.90	-.05	.03	-.77**	-	-.05	-.32**	.03	.32**	-.08	.14*
5. Other blame	2.93	1.88	.09	.01	-.80**	.61**	-	-.00	-.29**	-.10	.47**	-.18**
6. Self-happiness	3.79	1.99	-.01	-.02	.85**	-.77**	-.69**	-	.25**	-.17*	.17**	.05
7. Other-happiness	3.32	1.68	-.13*	.01	.72**	-.54**	-.70**	.70**	-	.16*	-.18**	.52**
8. Repair	4.14	1.72	.00	.07	-.44**	.52**	.29**	-.45**	-.21**	-	-.09	.18**
9. Retaliate	2.24	1.43	.04	-.14*	-.61**	.43**	.71**	-.45**	-.54**	.20**	-	-.06
10. Affiliate	3.39	1.62	-.04	-.00	.57**	-.36**	-.55**	.50**	.71**	-.11	-.39**	-

N = 226; *. p < .05; ** p < .01; gender was coded -1 for males and 1 for females; gossip valence was coded 1 for positive condition and -1 for negative condition; zero order correlations below the diagonal and partial correlations controlling for gossip valence above the diagonal.

Partial correlations showed that self-blame and other-blame were unrelated (r = -.05, ns), whereas self-directed and other-directed happiness were positively related (r = .25, p < .01).

Hypotheses testing. To test our hypotheses, we conducted multiple regressions with Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes' (2007) procedure for mediation analysis. To assess the indirect effect of gossip valence on each of the three behavioral intentions we employed 5000 bootstrap samples; all four emotions were included as mediators and we examined the unique indirect effects for each emotion (see Table 4.2).

In line with hypothesis 1a, targets of negative gossip experienced higher self-directed blame (M = 4.35; SD =1.54) than targets of positive gossip (M = 1.35; SD = .73), b = 1.48, p < .001. Self-directed blame predicted repair intentions, b = .36, p < .001, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on repair intentions, *indirect effect* = -.53, 95% CI [-.82; -.28], confirming hypothesis 1b. Furthermore, consistent with hypothesis 2a, targets of negative gossip experienced higher other-directed blame (M = 4.49; SD = 1.41) than targets of positive gossip (M = 1.44; SD = .71), b = 1.52, p < .001. Other-directed blame predicted retaliation intentions, b = .44, p < .001, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on retaliation intentions, *indirect effect* = -.68, 95% CI [-.95; -.43], supporting hypothesis 2b. Furthermore, consistent with hypothesis 3, positive gossip targets experienced higher self-directed happiness (M = 5.44; SD = .92) than negative gossip targets (M = 2.05; SD = 1.15), b = 1.69, p < .001. Finally, as predicted by hypothesis 4a, positive gossip targets experienced higher other-directed happiness (M = 4.51; SD = 1.28) than negative gossip targets (M = 2.07; SD = 1.02), b = 1.21, p < .001. Other-directed happiness predicted affiliation intentions, b = .60, p < .001, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on affiliation intentions, *indirect effect* = .73, 95% CI [.53; .94], supporting hypothesis 4b.

In addition to the hypothesized indirect effects, the analyses reported in Table 4.2 showed that other-directed happiness was also related to repair intentions, and mediated the

effect of gossip valence on repair intentions. Furthermore, self-directed happiness was related to retaliation intentions, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on retaliation intentions. Although these indirect effects were unexpected, they are weaker than hypothesized effects.

To further validate our model, we tested all hypotheses simultaneously and conducted a structural equation modeling analysis using the partial least squares (SEM-PLS) approach. The main advantages of PLS over covariance-based structural equation modeling (e.g., LISREL) are that PLS is well suited for complex models and small sample sizes (Fornell & Bookstein 1982). We used SmartPLS software to carry out the analyses (Ringle, Wende, & Will, 2005). As shown in Figure 4.1, all hypotheses are supported by the SEM analysis as well.

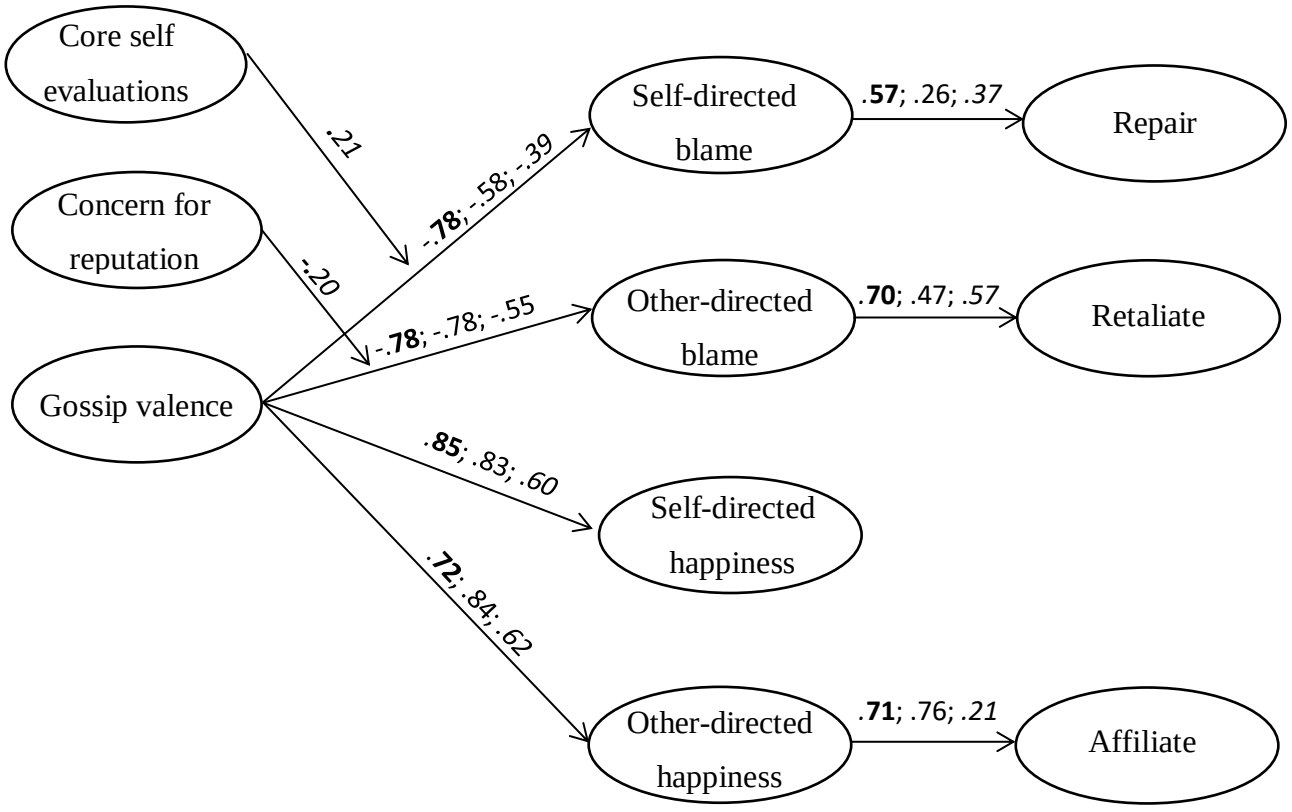

Figure 4.1. Path coefficients obtained through SEM-PLS in Studies 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3. All coefficients are significant at $p < .01$. Coefficients in boldface represent effects in Study 4.1. Unformatted coefficients represent effects in Study 4.2 (only gossip condition, $N = 92$). Coefficients in italics represent effects in Study 4.3.

Table 4.2. Indirect effect analyses in Study 4.1.

	Mediator variable models			
	Self-blame	Other blame	Self-happiness	Other happiness
	b (t)	*b (t)*	*b (t)*	*b (t)*
Gossip valence (GV)	**-1.48*** (-18.58)**	**-1.52*** (-20.57)**	**1.69*** (24.32)**	**1.21*** (15.72)**
	Dependent variable models			
	Repair intentions	Retaliation intentions	Affiliation intentions	
	b (t)	*b (t)*	*b (t)*	
Gossip valence	-.28 (-1.18)	-.44* (-2.74)	.43* (2.32)	
Self-blame	**.36*** (4.20)**	.0037 (.06)	.12 (1.82)	
Other-blame	-.06 (-.66)	**.44*** (7.23)**	-.02 (-.30)	
Self-happiness	-.18 (-1.80)	.21** (3.16)	-.06 (-.78)	
Other-happiness	.23* (2.56)	-.09 (-1.60)	**.60*** (8.53)**	
	Indirect effects			
Self-blame	**-.53 [-.82; -.28]**	-.00 [-.23; .23]	-.18 [-.38; .009]	
Other-blame	-.09 [-.20; .36]	**-.68 [-.95; -.43]**	.03 [-.18; .29]	
Self-happiness	-.31 [-.67; .03]	.37 [.09; .62]	-.10 [-.37; .15]	
Other-happiness	.28 [.07; .50]	-.12 [-.28; .01]	**.73 [.53; .94]**	

N = 226; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; coefficients in boldface represent hypothesized effects.

Additional analyses. Because previous research on gossip is not conclusive about gender effects (e.g., Martinescu et al., 2014; Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010; Nevo et al., 1994) we explored whether participant gender moderated the effect of gossip valence on emotions and behavioral intentions. A MANOVA with gender and gossip valence as predictors showed a multivariate interaction effect on the emotion measures, $\lambda = .95$, F (4, 219) = 2.62, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Univariate analyses showed (marginally) significant interaction effects on other directed-blame, F (1, 222) = 3.64, $p = .058$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, self-directed happiness, F (1, 222) = 5.41, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and other directed happiness, F (1, 222) = 3.86, $p = .051$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Specifically, valence effects on other-directed blame were stronger for women ($M_{negative}$ = 4.68; = $M_{positive}$ 1.34) than for men ($M_{negative}$ = 4.32; = $M_{positive}$ 1.54). Receiving positive rather than negative gossip about themselves elicited higher self-directed happiness for women ($M_{positive}$ = 5.53; $M_{negative}$ = 1.81) than it did for men ($M_{positive}$ = 5.35; $M_{negative}$ =

2.27). Valence effects on other-directed happiness were also stronger for women ($M_{positive}$ = 4.67; $M_{negative}$ = 1.91) than for men ($M_{positive}$ = 4.36; $M_{negative}$ = 2.21). A MANOVA with gender and gossip valence as predictors showed no multivariate interaction effect on the behavioral intention measures, $\lambda = .99$, F (3, 220) = 0.73, ns.

Discussion

Results of Study 1 support our expectations that gossip targets experience distinct emotions which translate into specific behavioral intentions. Specifically, self-directed blame was higher for targets of negative than for targets of positive gossip, and generated repair intentions. Negative compared to positive gossip also evoked more other-directed blame, which increased retaliation intentions against gossipers. Compared to negative gossip, positive gossip made targets feel happier with themselves and with gossipers; furthermore, gossiper-directed happiness was related to affiliation intentions.

In Study 4.1 we found good support for our predictions that receiving gossip about the self generates positive and negative emotions and behavioral intentions. However, these findings do not clarify whether targets' reactions are general responses to positive and negative evaluative information about themselves, or whether reactions to gossip can be distinguished from reactions to (formal) feedback. On the one hand, gossip and feedback may generate similar reactions because they offer targets self-relevant information. On the other hand, feedback and gossip may have different effects on targets' self-directed and other directed emotions, because they are associated with different agency appraisals. Feedback is addressed directly and is meant to help targets self-improve (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), possibly making people feel personally responsible for their evaluations. Because gossip is spread behind their back with an obscure purpose (e.g. gain information, protect others, harm targets, or enjoyment, Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012), targets may perceive others as responsible for generating the gossip, and may feel more inclined to discount gossip in

comparison to feedback. Furthermore, because gossip is spread voluntarily, it may generate higher other-directed emotions, whereas feedback may generate higher self-directed emotions. Moreover, because gossip is more socially undesirable and more intrusive than feedback, it may generate more negative responses from targets. In a second scenario study we explored whether people react differently to gossip and feedback.

Study 4.2

Method

Participants and design. Two hundred and four U.S. employees who worked at least 20 hours a week completed an online questionnaire via M-Turk in exchange for 1.5 $. Three participants failed an attention check that asked them to not indicate their hobbies, and were excluded from the analyses. The remaining 201 participants, 73 female, had an average age of 34.11 (SD_{age} = 9.43). The study had a 2 (gossip valence) x 2 (type of information: gossip *vs.* feedback) between subjects design.

Procedure. Participants read that the study was about workplace communication, and received a scenario in which they work at a sales department with two others, Sam and Alex, who have similar jobs.

Manipulations. Participants imagined that while reading emails in their office, they either receive formal feedback about their work contribution, as part of an anonymous 360 degree feedback system, which they recognize as written by Sam, or that they accidentally overhear Sam gossip to Alex about them. The information participants received was the same in the feedback and gossip conditions, and was framed either negatively or positively: "[Target name] knows we have to focus on the new clients *and / but* I have the feeling that (s)he *is / is not* working very hard lately. That's *really / not* nice, because we all need to take more responsibility."

Measures

Manipulation checks. Participants indicated whether the received information was positive or negative. They could choose between: *My colleague Sam* (1) *said something negative about me* and (2) *said something positive about me.* Next, participants indicated whether the information about them was in the form of feedback or gossip: *The things Sam said about me (1) were meant to be communicated as feedback to me* and (2) *were meant to be communicated behind my back.*

Emotions and behavioral intentions. Rather than using the PANAS-X scale to measure emotions, we developed items that better distinguish self-directed versus other-directed emotions. Because *self-directed blame* was assessed with clear self-referenced items in Study 1 (e.g., "I feel guilty"), we did not alter that scale (α = .98). We measured *other-directed blame* with two items: "I feel angry with my colleagues" and "I feel upset with my colleagues" (α = .99), *self-directed happiness* with three items: "Happy about myself," "Enthusiastic about myself," and "Proud," α = .98, and *other-directed happiness* was measured using the items: "I feel happy about my colleagues," "I feel enthusiastic about my colleagues," "I like my colleagues," and "I feel close to my colleagues," α = .97. Confirmatory factor analyses showed that the hypothesized four-factor model had a better fit, $\chi^2(47) = 174.45$, $p < .001$, CFI = .98, SRMR = .02, RMSEA = .11, than a model with factors for positive and negative emotions, $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 2758.27$, $p < .001$, CFI = .51, SRMR = .54, RMSEA = .53, and to a model with two factors for self-directed and other-directed emotions, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 748.02$, $p < .001$, CFI = .81, SRMR = .19, RMSEA = .28.

In Study 1, *repair intentions* were measured indirectly, by asking how helpful the gossip would be for improving the targets' performance. In Study 2, we used a more direct measure (2 items), reflecting increased work effort: "…Try to do my job better" and "…Put in more effort at work," α = .96. *Retaliation intentions,* α = .85, and *affiliation intentions,* α = .94, were measured as in Study 1. A confirmatory factor analysis showed that the

hypothesized three-factor model had a better fit χ^2 (6) = 17.29, p = < .01, CFI = .98, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .09, than a one-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2$ (2) = 3.02.63, p < .001, CFI = .17, SRMR = .23, RMSEA = .44.

Results

Manipulation checks. One participant in the positive and one in the negative gossip condition incorrectly indicated valence of the information. Furthermore, 13 participants who received feedback and 11 who received gossip incorrectly indicated the type of information. In total, 23 participants failed manipulation checks and were excluded from further analyses.

Descriptive statistics. Gossip valence was strongly correlated with the other variables (see zero-order correlations in Table 4.3, below the diagonal), which may lead to spurious correlations among emotions and intentions. Therefore, Table 4.3 also contains partial correlations among these variables, controlling for valence (above the diagonal). Partial correlations showed that self-blame and other-blame were unrelated (r = .03, ns), whereas self-directed and other-directed happiness were positively related (r = .66, p < .01). This correlation pattern is consistent with results of Study 4.1.

Main findings. We tested whether the effects found in Study 1 are moderated by the type of information received, by using a bootstrapping procedure for assessing indirect and conditional indirect effects (Preacher et al., 2007). Results showed that participants who received negative information about themselves experienced higher self-directed blame (M = 3.79, SD = 1.94) than participants who received positive information (M = 1.13, SD = .45), b = -1.35, p < .001, and that participants who received feedback (M = 2.68, SD = 1.77) blamed themselves more than participants who received gossip (M = 2.20, SD = 2.06), b = .31, p < .01. These main effects were qualified by an interaction effect showing that feedback targets blamed themselves more than gossip targets when the information was negative, but not when it was positive, b = -.33, p < .01, as shown in Figure 4.2. Furthermore, self-directed blame

predicted repair intentions, b = -.36, p <.001. Consequently, the indirect effect of information valence on repair intentions through self-directed blame was stronger when participants received feedback (*indirect effect* = -.60 [-.88; -.35]) rather than gossip (*indirect effect* = -.36 [-.57; -.20]). These findings confirm hypotheses 1a and 1b, and in addition show that people experienced higher self-directed blame in response to negative feedback than to negative gossip, as shown in Table 4.4.

Receiving negative information about the self generated higher other-directed blame (M = 4.47, SD = 1.72) than positive information (M = 1.17, SD = .55), b = -1.63, p < .001, and receiving gossip (M = 3.04, SD =2.21) generated higher other-blame than receiving feedback (M = 2.50, SD = 1.89), b = -.19, p < .05. The interaction effect of valence and type of information on other-directed blame was not significant, b = .09, ns. Furthermore, other-directed blame predicted retaliation intentions, b = .31, p <.001, and mediated the effect of information valence on retaliation intentions, *indirect effect* = -.51 [-.86; -.16]. These results confirm hypotheses 2a and 2b, and in addition show that people reacted with higher other-directed blame to gossip than to feedback.

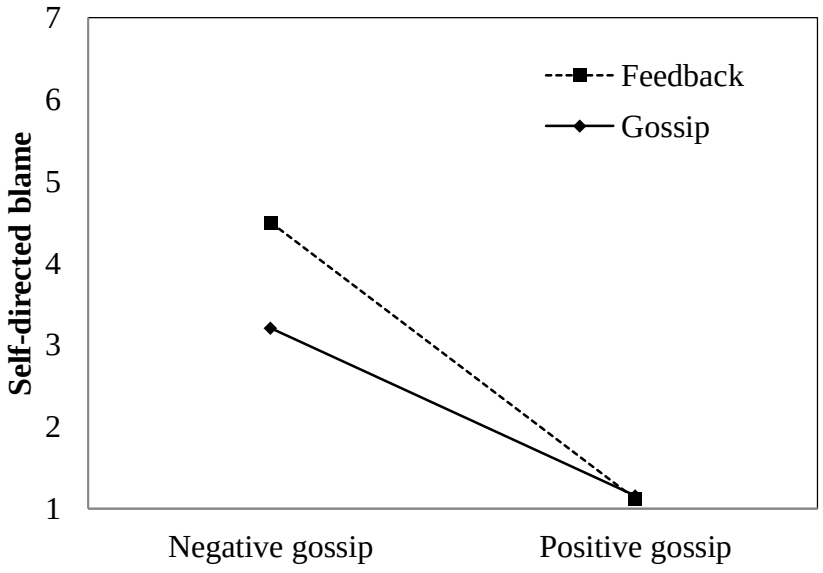

Figure 4.2. Self-directed blame as a function of valence and type of information in Study 4.2.

Table 4.3. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for variables in Study 4.2.

	Mean	SD	1.	2	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Age	34.15	9.27	-	-.08	-	-.02	-.05	.16*	-.00	-.04	-.06	-.05	-.06
2. Gender	-.28	.96	-.08	-	-	-.11	.03	.17*	.15*	.04	.10	-.11	.04
3. Valence	.02	1.00	.06	-.01	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Info. type	-.03	1.00	-.02	-.11	.04	-	.21**	-.15*	.03	.18*	.01	-.09	.02
5. Self-blame	2.43	1.92	-.08	.04	-.69**	.12	-	.03	-.17*	.06	.39**	.00	.22**
6. Other-blame	2.78	2.08	.05	.11	-.79**	-.13	.56**	-	.01	-.27**	-.12	.32**	-.18*
7. Self-happiness	3.84	2.16	.05	.07	.84**	.05	-.65**	-.66**	-	.66**	.22**	.07	.35**
8. Other-happiness	3.87	2.00	.02	.00	.84**	.14	-.55**	-.75**	.90**	-	.39**	-.04	.62**
9. Repair	5.43	1.27	-.05	.10	.07	.01	.23**	-.13	.18*	.27**	-	-.24**	.42**
10. Retaliate	1.79	1.33	-.07	-.09	-.38**	-.10	.27**	.48**	-.28**	-.34**	-.25**	-	-.02
11. Affiliate	4.25	1.85	-.01	.02	.64**	.05	-.32**	-.59**	.69**	.80**	.37**	-.26**	-

N = 178; *. $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; gender was coded -1 for males and 1 for females; gossip valence was coded 1 for positive condition and -1 for negative condition; type of information was coded with -1 for gossip and 1 for feedback condition; zero order correlations below the diagonal and partial correlations controlling for gossip valence above the diagonal.

Table 4.4. Indirect effects and conditional indirect effects analyses in Study 4.2.

	Mediator models			
	Self-blame	Other blame	Self-happiness	Other happiness
	b (t)	b (t)	b (t)	b (t)
Valence (V)	**-1.35 (-13.60)*** **	**-1.63 (-17.34)*** **	**1.82 (20.89)*** **	**1.67 (20.64)*** **
Type of Information (TI)	.31 (3.11)**	-.19 (-2.11)*	.03 (.45)	.20 (2.52)*
V*TI	-.33 (-3.32)**	.09 (1.04)	.03 (.41)	-.02 (-.35)

	Dependent variable models		
	Repair intentions	Retaliation intentions	Affiliation intentions
	b (t)	b (t)	b (t)
Valence	-.30 (-1.56)	-.12 (-.56)	.11 (.55)
Self-blame	**.36 (5.88)*** **	.01 (.16)	.18 (2.93)**
Other-blame	-.06 (-.86)	**.31 (4.08)*** **	-.01 (-.17)
Self-happiness	.11 (1.15)	.08 (.77)	-.04 (-.41)
Other-happiness	.33 (2.99) **	-.009 (-.58)	**.82 (7.23)*** **
	Indirect effects		
Self-blame	**-.47 [-.72; -.30]**	-.01 [-.25; .26]	-.24 [-.47; -.04]
Other-blame	.09 [-.13; .35]	**-.51 [-.86; -.16]**	.02 [-.30; .35]
Self-happiness	.21 [-.12; .59]	.15 [-.20; .58]	-.07 [-.49; .29]
Other-happiness	.56 [.17; .87]	-.01 [-.41; .32]	**1.38 [.96; 1.89]**

Mediator	Moderator		Conditional indirect effect
Self-blame	TI	Gossip	**-.36 [-.57; -.20]**
		Feedback	**-.60 [-.88; -.35]**

N = 178; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; gossip valence was coded 1 for positive condition and -1 for negative condition; type of information was coded with -1 for gossip and 1 for feedback condition; coefficients in boldface represent hypothesized effects.

Receiving positive information about oneself elicited higher self-directed happiness (*M* = 5.63, *SD* = 1.19), than receiving negative information (*M* = 1.97, *SD* = 1.11), *b* = 1.82, $p < .001$, but there was no effect of type of information, *b* = .03, ns, and no interaction effect on self-directed happiness, *b* = .03, ns. These results support hypothesis 3.

Participants experienced higher other-directed happiness in response to positive information (*M* = 5.52, *SD* = 1.09), than in response to negative information (*M* = 2.15, *SD* = 1.08), *b* = 1.67, $p < .001$, and feedback generated higher other-directed happiness (*M* = 4.16, *SD* = 1.95) than gossip (*M* = 3.60, *SD* = 2.02), *b* = .20, $p < .05$. There was no interaction effect of information type and valence on other-directed happiness, *b* = -.02, ns. Furthermore,

other-directed happiness predicted affiliation intentions, $b = .82$, $p < .001$, and mediated the effect of information valence on affiliation intentions, *indirect effect* = 1.38 [.96; 1.89].These results confirm hypotheses 4a and 4b.

In addition to the hypothesized indirect effects, the analyses reported in Table 4.4 showed that other-directed happiness predicted repair intentions, and mediated the effect of information valence on repair intentions. Moreover, self-directed blame predicted affiliation intentions, and mediated the effect of information valence on affiliation intentions.

As in Study 4.1, we also used SEM-PLS to test our hypotheses simultaneously. Consistent with previous analyses, all hypotheses were supported by the SEM analysis as well (see Figure 4.1).

Discussion

The findings of Study 2 are consistent with results of Study 4.1, and in addition indicate that people have distinguishable reactions to feedback and gossip about the self. People who received feedback blamed themselves more than people who received gossip, but only when the information was negative, possibly because they attributed higher responsibility to themselves. Negative information generated higher self-directed blame and repair intentions than positive information, especially when framed as feedback rather than gossip. Moreover, people blamed gossipers more than people who provided feedback, and they were happier with others who provided feedback than with gossipers; the two types of self-relevant information generated similar self-directed happiness levels. As in Study 4.1, negative compared to positive information evoked more other-directed blame, which increased retaliation intentions. Compared to negative gossip, positive gossip made targets feel happier with themselves and others, and other-directed happiness increased affiliation intentions.

Results of Studies 1 and 2 indicated that negative gossip targets have quite different and potentially incompatible reactions: self-directed blame and repair intentions on the one hand, and other-directed blame and retaliation intentions on the other. It is therefore important to examine when or for whom these different responses are more likely to occur. Because people's predispositions influence processing of social and emotional stimuli (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), emotional reactions to gossip about the self may depend on specific individual differences. Whereas positive self-directed and other-directed emotions can easily co-occur and may be universally experienced by targets of positive gossip, individuals may react differently to negative gossip. Threats and losses trigger more specific responses than gains (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Wegge et al., 2006), and these responses may depend on dispositional factors (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). We specifically propose that responses to negative gossip will depend on individuals' core self-evaluations (CSE, Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997) and concern for reputation (CR, De Cremer & Tyler, 2005).

People's sensitivity to negative stimuli may vary depending on their core self-evaluations (CSE, Judge et al., 1997). CSE is a higher order construct that reflects individuals' fundamental appraisals about their self-worth and capabilities. Individuals with low CSE evaluate their identities and capabilities negatively and have low beliefs regarding their self-esteem, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and emotional stability (Judge et al., 1997; Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoreson, 2003). Due to their weak coping and self-regulation skills, people with low CSE seek little social support, develop few social ties, are vulnerable to threats (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012), and more intensely experience stressful work events, such as negative gossip (Grant & Sonnentag, 2010). Because targets of negative gossip with low CSE see themselves as unworthy individuals, unable to cope with challenges, they may think that indeed they are responsible for their negative evaluations.

Thus we hypothesize that the effect of gossip valence on self-directed blame is stronger for individuals with low rather than high CSE (hypothesis 5a). Moreover, we expect that the indirect effect of gossip valence on repair intentions through self-directed blame is stronger for individuals with low rather than high CSE (hypothesis 5b).

Reputation is the extent to which someone is known to be trustworthy (Burt, 2008), and represents shared opinions about a focal person above and beyond directly observable behavior (Burt, 2008; Sommerfeld et al., 2007). People need a favorable reputation to ensure future collaborations with others (Burt, 2008), but their reputation is vulnerable to gossip (Foster, 2004). Concern for reputation (CR) reflects the importance people give to their public image of being trustworthy (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005). Targets who are concerned about their reputation are highly aware of the losses associated with a bad reputation (Burt, 2008). Consequently, targets with high CR may perceive others who spread negative gossip about them as highly offensive and unfair, causing them to blame gossipers for harming them. We therefore expect that the effect of gossip valence on other-directed blame is stronger for people with high rather than low CR (hypothesis 6a). Furthermore, we expect that the indirect effect of gossip valence on retaliation intentions through other-directed blame is stronger for people with high rather than low CR (hypothesis 6b). Hence, we conducted a critical incident study among Dutch employees to investigate the moderating effects of CSE and CR on negative emotions in response to gossip.

Study 4.3

Method

Participants and design. Two hundred forty Dutch employees (M_{age} = 37.04, SD_{age} = 13.23; 109 female, 5 unspecified) working in different sectors (e.g. media, retail, tourism, health, banking, resource exploitation, public administration) voluntarily and anonymously completed an online survey, distributed using a snowballing method, with a response rate of

61.38 %. Participants' current employment duration was on average 8.39 years ($SD_{employment}$ = 9.44); 102 participants reported working part-time, with an average of 24.09 (*SD* = 8.12) hours per week. Most participants (73.2%) had a university degree, 21.7% had a vocational degree and 5.1% had a lower education degree. Participants were randomly assigned to a positive (*N* =121) or negative (*N* = 119) gossip condition.

Procedure. Participants were informed that the study was about workplace informal talk and interpersonal perception. First participants completed personality questionnaires. Next, they were randomly assigned to a gossip valence condition, and were asked to recall and describe a specific situation in which a co-worker said something either positive or negative about their work performance behind their back to another co-worker. Afterwards, they completed dependent measures, were debriefed and thanked for participation. The survey was translated into Dutch and back-translated into English. Participants could choose between a Dutch and an English version of the study.

Measures. CSE was measured using the twelve item *core self-evaluation* scale (Judge et al., 2003) and the validated Dutch translation of that scale (De Pater, Schinkel, & Nijstad, 2007). This scale consists of the sub-dimensions of self-esteem (e.g. "Overall, I am satisfied with myself"), generalized self-efficacy (e.g. "When I try, I generally succeed"), neuroticism (e.g. "Sometimes when I fail I feel worthless"), and internal locus of control (e.g. "I determine what will happen in my life"); overall α = .85. *Concern for reputation* (CR; α = .73) was measured with 7 items (e.g. "I wish to have a good reputation", De Cremer & Tyler, 2005).

We used the same measures as in Study 2 for assessing the emotions of self-directed blame (α = .93), other-directed blame (α = .91), self-directed happiness (α = .96), and other-directed happiness (α = .88), and the behavioral intentions to repair (α = .92), retaliate, (α = .85), and affiliate (α = .88).

Results

Manipulation checks. Sixty six participants (27.5 %) were unable to recall being the target of either positive (N = 26) or negative gossip (N = 40), according to their condition, and were excluded from further analyses. Two coders blind to conditions assessed the valence of gossip incidents reported by participants, with an agreement of .87 (Cohen's Kappa). Two participants described gossip situations that were inconsistent with their assigned gossip valence condition and were excluded from the analysis; the final sample included 95 participants in the positive gossip condition and 77 in the negative gossip condition.

Descriptive statistics. Table 4.5 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for variables in Study 4.3. As in Study 4.1 and 4.2, most measures are strongly correlated with gossip valence, and Table 4.5 therefore also reports partial correlations controlling for gossip valence. These partial correlations showed that the negative emotions of self-directed blame and other-directed blame were correlated, r = .29, p < .01, and so were the positive emotions happy with self and happy with others, r = .49, p < .01.

Hypothesis testing. We tested our hypotheses using a bootstrapping procedure for assessing indirect and conditional indirect effects (Preacher et al., 2007). Entering gossip valence as independent variable and all four emotions as mediator variables, we tested two moderated mediation models: the first had CSE as first-stage moderator and repair intention as outcome variable, while the second one had CR as first stage moderator and retaliation intention as outcome. In addition, we tested a mediation model with affiliation intention as outcome variable. For each of the following models 5000 bootstrap samples were used. Results are shown in Table 4.6.

Table 4.5. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations for variables in Study 4.3.

Variable	Mean	SD	1.	2	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12
1. Age	36.34	12.98	-	-.21*	.18*	-.14		-.13	-.05	-.07	.03	-.15	-.22*	-.21*
2. Gender	.10	.99	-.22*	-	-.12	.11	-	-.00	.10	.02	.01	.07	.06	.05
3. Core self-evaluations	5.28	.79	.18*	-.12	-	-.29**	-	-.39**	-.19*	.15*	.15*	-.28**	-.28**	-.22**
4. Concern for reputation	4.49	.91	-.14	.11	-.31**	-	-	.12	.24**	.11	.07	.28**	.07	.25**
5. Gossip valence	.10	.99	-.07	.16*	.00	.01	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. Self-blame	1.69	1.11	-.09	-.07	-.37**	.11	-.39**	-	.29**	-.18*	-.09	.30**	.22**	.18*
7. Other-blame	2.10	1.56	.001	-.001	-.17*	.19**	-.55**	.44**	-	-.003	-.27**	-.01	.44**	.17
8. Self-happiness	4.35	1.73	-.10	.11	.13	.08	.60**	-.37**	-.33**	-	.49**	.05	.08	.16*
9. Other-happiness	4.38	1.55	-.02	.10	.13	.05	.59**	-.30**	-.51**	.67**	-	.18*	-.21**	.24**
10. Repair	3.55	1.89	-.13	.03	-.27**	.27**	-.23**	.36**	.12	-.10	.00	-	.06	.41**
11. Retaliate	1.75	1.18	-.17	-.01	-.26**	.06	-.43**	.36**	.57**	-.20**	-.41**	.16*	-	.04
12. Affiliate	2.70	1.60	-.22*	.05	-.22**	.25**	.00	.16*	.14	.13	.19*	.40**	.03	-

N = 172; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; gender was coded -1 for males and 1 for females; gossip valence was coded 1 for positive condition and -1 for negative condition; zero order correlations below the diagonal and partial correlations controlling for gossip valence above the diagonal.

Table 4.6. Indirect effects and conditional indirect effects analyses in Study 4.3.

			Mediator models			
			Self-blame	Other blame	Self-happiness	Other happiness
			b (t)	b (t)	b (t)	b (t)
Gossip valence (GV)			**-.44*** (-5.55)**	**-.87*** (-8.54)**	**1.05*** (9.77)**	**.91*** (9.39)**
Gossip valence (GV)			**-1.70*** (-3.33)**	**.30 (.60)**		
Core self-evaluation (CSE)			-.46*** (-4.88)			
GV*CSE			**.23* (2.50)**			
Concern for reputation (CR)				.34** (3.16)		
GV*CR				**-.26* (-2.40)**		
			Dependent variable models			
			Repair intentions	Retaliation intentions	Affiliation intentions	
			b (t)	b (t)	b (t)	
Gossip valence			-.53** (-2.73)	-.21* (-2.04)	-.05 (-.30)	
Self-blame			**.61*** (4.43)**	.15* (2.03)	.24* (2.00)	
Other-blame			-.08 (-.78)	**.27*** (4.41)**	.26** (2.69)	
Self-happiness			.03 (.29)	.16** (2.66)	.05 (.52)	
Other-happiness			.26* (2.04)	-.18** (-2.62)	**.37** (3.26)**	
			Indirect effects			
Self-blame			**-.27 [-.44; -.15]**	-.06 [-.15; .01]	-.10 [-.21; -.02]	
Other-blame			.07 [-.09; .28]	**-.23 [-.41; -.09]**	-.22 [-.41; -.05]	
Self-happiness			.03 [-.22; .33]	.17 [.01; .34]	.05 [-.13; .26]	
Other-happiness			.24 [-.007; .50]	-.17 [-.35; -.03]	**.34 [.16; .55]**	
Mediator	Moderator		Conditional indirect effects			
Self-blame	CSE	Low (*M* -1 *SD*)	**-.38 [-.67; -.18]**			
		High (*M* +1 *SD*)	**-.15[-.27; -.06]**			
Other blame	CR	Low (*M* -1 *SD*)		**-.17 [-.33; -.07]**		
		High (*M* +1 *SD*)		**-.30 [-.53; -.11]**		

N = 172; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; gender was coded -1 for males and 1 for females; gossip valence was coded 1 for positive condition and -1 for negative condition; coefficients in boldface represent hypothesized effects.

As predicted by hypothesis 1a, self-directed blame was higher in the negative (M = 2.18, SD = 1.38) than in the positive gossip condition (M = 1.29, SD = .59), b = -.1.70, p < .001. Consistent with hypothesis 5a, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction with CSE, b = .23, p < .05, showing that the effect of gossip valence on self-directed blame was more pronounced for participants with low CSE (M – 1 SD; b = -.62, t = -6.09, p < .001) than for participants with high CSE (M + 1 SD; b= -.25, t = -2.48, p < .05), as shown in Figure 4.3. Furthermore, as predicted by hypothesis 1b, self-directed blame was related to repair intentions, b = .61, p < .001. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 5b, the indirect effect of gossip valence on repair intentions through self-directed blame was stronger for participants with low CSE (*indirect effect* = -.38, 95% CI [-.67; -.18]), than for participants with high CSE (*indirect effect* = -.15, 95% CI [-.27; -.06]).

In line with hypothesis 2a, other-directed blame was higher in the negative (M = 3.05, SD = 1.79) than in the positive gossip condition (M = 1.31, SD = .65), b = -87, p < .001. When CR was entered as a moderator, the effect of gossip valence on other-directed blame became non-significant, b = .30, ns. However, consistent with hypothesis 6a, the interaction between gossip valence and CR was significant and in the hypothesized direction, b = -.26, p < .05. Specifically, the effect of gossip valence on other-directed blame was stronger for participants with high CR (M + 1 SD; b = -1.14, t = 8.15, p < .001) than for participants with low CR (M -1 SD; b = -.63, t = -4.63, p < .001), as illustrated in Figure 4.4. Furthermore, other-directed blame predicted retaliation intentions, b = .27, p < .001, supporting hypothesis 2b. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 6b, the indirect effect of gossip valence on retaliation intentions through other-

directed blame was stronger for participants with high CR (*indirect effect* = -.30, 95% CI [-.53; -.11]), than for participants with low CR (*indirect effect* = -.17, 95% CI [-.33; -.07]).

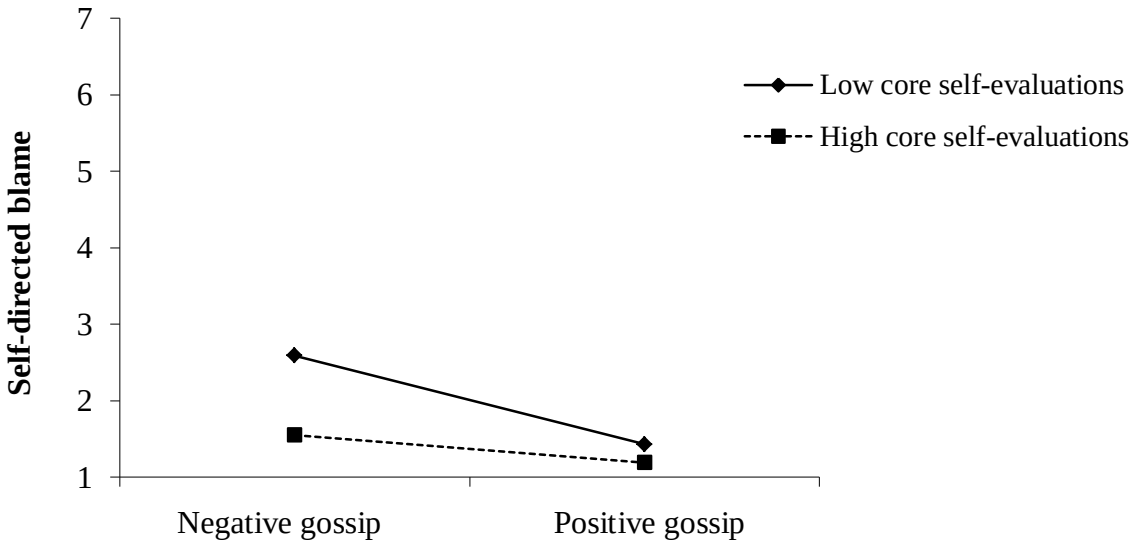

Figure 4.3. Self-directed blame as a function of gossip valence and core self-evaluations.

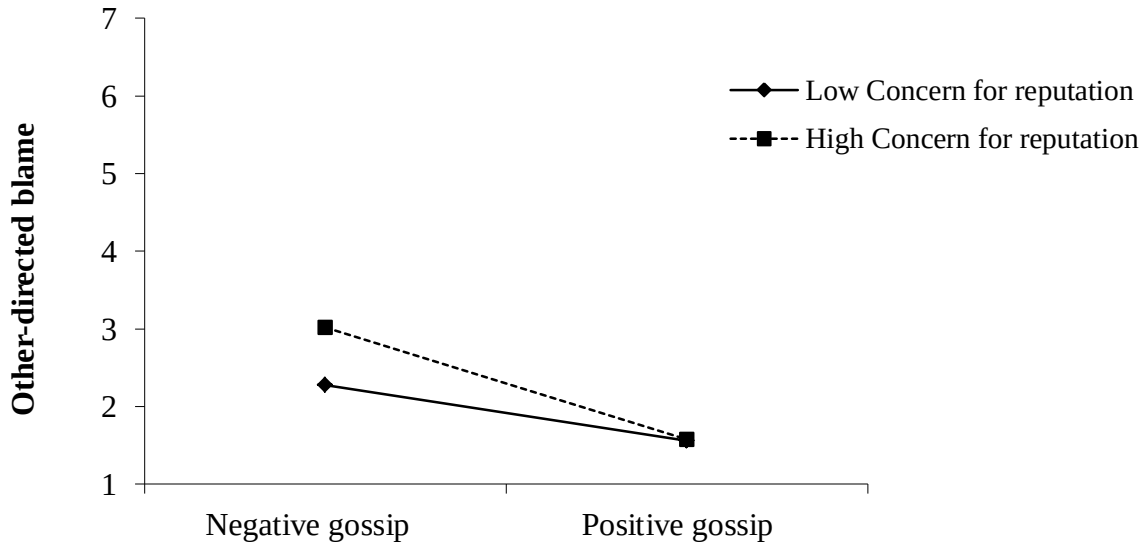

Figure 4.4. Other-directed blame as a function of gossip valence and concern for reputation.

Furthermore, in line with hypothesis 3, positive gossip targets experienced higher self-directed happiness (M = 5.31; SD = 1.12) than negative gossip targets (M = 3.21; SD = 1.64), b = 1.05, $p < .001$. Finally, as predicted by hypothesis 4a, targets of positive gossip experienced higher other-directed happiness (M = 5.22; SD = 1.21) than negative gossip targets (M = 3.38; SD = 1.30), b = .91, $p < .001$. Other-directed happiness predicted affiliation intentions, b = .37, $p < .01$, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on affiliation intentions, *indirect effect* = .34, 95% CI [.16; .55], which supports hypothesis 4b.

In addition to the hypothesized indirect effects, the analyses reported in Table 4.6 showed that self-directed happiness was also related to retaliation intentions, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on retaliation intentions; other-directed happiness was negatively related to retaliation intentions, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on retaliation intentions. Moreover, self-directed blame was related to affiliation intentions, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on affiliation intentions; other-directed blame was related to affiliation intentions, and mediated the effect of gossip valence on affiliation intentions. Similar to Study 1 and 2, these unexpected indirect effects were weaker than hypothesized effects.

As in Study 4.1 and 4.2, we also used SEM-PLS to test our hypotheses simultaneously. Consistent with previous analyses, all hypotheses were supported by the SEM analysis as well (see Figure 4.1).

Additional analyses. We investigated whether participant gender moderated the effect of gossip valence on emotions and behavioral intentions. Two MANOVAs with gender and gossip valence as predictors showed no multivariate interaction effect on the emotion measures, $\lambda = .96$, F (4, 159) = 1.43, ns, and no multivariate interaction effect on the behavioral intention measures,

$\lambda = .98$, F (3, 160) = 1.03, ns. However, a univariate analysis showed a significant interaction on other-directed happiness, F (1, 162) = 3.89, p = .05, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, indicating that valence effects of other-directed happiness were stronger for women ($M_{positive} = 5.37$; $M_{negative} = 3.18$) than for men ($M_{positive} = 4.96$; $M_{negative} = 3.56$).

General discussion

Using cognitive appraisal theory (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), we showed that hearing positive and negative gossip aroused specific self-directed and other-directed emotions and behavioral intentions for gossip targets. First, negative (vs. positive) gossip made targets blame themselves for the unfavorable evaluations and motivated them to repair their flaws or mistakes (e.g., through exerting more effort). Moreover, self-blame and repair intentions were stronger for people with low core self-evaluations (CSE), who are less resilient to challenges or threats. Thus, for targets with reduced coping abilities (Judge et al., 1997), blaming themselves and repairing their alleged mistakes might be an adaptive response, helping them avoid further deterioration of their self-views and social relationships. These results suggest that gossip may enforce group-benefiting behaviors and norm compliance by making targets experience self-directed blame, and are consistent with research addressing the social control function of gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; 2012; Feinberg et al., 2012; Sommerfeld et al., 2007).

Second, targets of negative (vs. positive) gossip blamed the gossiper for spreading unfavorable evaluations of them, which predicted retaliation intentions. Moreover, other-directed blame and retaliation intentions were stronger for targets with high rather than low concerns for reputation (CR), because for people with high CR a positive reputation is essential and negative

gossip is more damaging. Blaming the gossiper for harming their social capital may be functional for high CR people, because such emotional reactions prepare them to confront those who have caused a reputational loss. These results are consistent with the popular view that spreading negative gossip is immoral and destructive, and generates aggression (Waddington, 2012).

Third, people who overheard positive (vs. negative) performance-related gossip about themselves experienced self-directed happiness. People are reassured by positive gossip (Kunda, 1990), which confirms valuable attributes or goal accomplishment (Schwartz & Clore, 1983) and serves the fundamental need for a positive self-view (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). As expressions of pride are likely to manifest subtly, we did not predict any specific behavioral intentions to be associated with self-directed happiness. However, positive gossip may signal adaptive fitness for its targets through self-directed happiness (Schwartz & Clore, 1983), and may motivate individuals to strive for future achievements and status (Tracy et al., 2010).

Fourth, positive (vs. negative) gossip aroused other-directed happiness, which increased targets' intention to affiliate with gossipers. This finding is consistent with interpersonal evaluation research showing that positive evaluations make people like their evaluators (Hewitt, 1972). Targets of positive gossip understand that they earned others' acceptance and support, and perceive gossipers as trustworthy allies who may create future positive experiences for them. While previous gossip research already indicated that gossiping facilitates formation of social bonds and friendships among gossipers (Ellwardt et al., 2012a), the current results show that positive gossip also strengthens relationship between gossipers and targets.

Fifth, our work clarifies that people have distinct emotional reactions to gossip and feedback about themselves. Negative feedback generated higher self-directed blame than negative gossip, possibly because individuals see themselves as more responsible when negative evaluations are addressed to them directly for improvement and development purposes. In contrast, because negative gossip is spread behind the target's back and is not intended to advance performance, it may be more easily discounted by the target, thereby generating lower self-directed blame. However, gossip led to higher other-directed blame than feedback and lower other-directed happiness, suggesting that gossip makes targets feel that others are the agents who generate their evaluations and control their reputation. These other-oriented agency appraisals are likely to increase negativity and decrease positivity towards others, because gossip is less acceptable and more threatening for the self than feedback.

In addition to the hypothesized reactions of gossip targets, the analyses revealed other effects. Consistent across Studies 4.1 and 4.3, self-directed happiness predicted retaliation intentions. Positive gossip may enable targets to evaluate themselves as better than others (i.e. hubristic pride, Tracy et al., 2010), possibly generating retaliation intentions because hubristic pride instigates people to establish a reputation of dominance and assert power through aggression (Tracy et al., 2010). However, other-directed happiness induced by positive gossip decreased retaliation intentions (Study 4.3) and increased repair intentions (Studies 4.1 and 4.2). Thus, positive gossip also made targets feel included, thereby motivating prosocial and reducing antisocial behaviors. As such, positive gossip seems to be a two-edged sword that can generate both retaliation and affiliation intentions by arousing self-directed and other-directed happiness, respectively. Furthermore, targets of negative gossip were more likely to affiliate with the

gossiper due to experienced self-directed blame (Studies 4.2 and 4.3) and other-directed blame (Study 4.3). Targets who blame themselves may see gossipers as expert observers of their shortcomings (expert power, Kurland & Pelled, 2000) and seek contact with them to obtain support or advice. In contrast, those who blame gossipers for harming them may seek future contact to disprove the negative gossip, or to search for retaliation opportunities.

Exploratory analyses in Study 4.1 revealed stronger gossip valence effects for women, who experienced stronger other-directed blame, self-directed happiness and other-directed happiness, and thus indirect effects on retaliation and affiliation intentions were stronger for women. These gender effects are in line with earlier research documenting that received gossip information about others induced stronger self-evaluations and emotions among women than men (Martinescu et al, 2014), possibly because women are more relational and interdependent than men and respond therefore more strongly to gossip which is relational in nature (Weber & Hertel, 2007).

Theoretical implications

The current findings are consistent with the cognitive appraisal framework, by showing that target's emotional reactions to gossip about themselves can be distinguished using valence (positive *vs.* negative) and agency appraisals (self-directed *vs.* other directed) of emotions. Previous research on gossip highlights three major functions of gossip: social control, indirect aggression, and socializing (e.g., Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Dunbar, 2004; Fine & Rosnow, 1978). Consistent with the social control function, our results show that gossipers' negative evaluations make targets blame themselves and intend to correct their flaws. However, gossip that reaches targets can also have unintended consequences, because targets may perceive the

gossip as harmful and intend to retaliate against gossipers, potentially leading to spiraling aggression. Regarding the socializing function, our study adds to previous research by showing that gossip not only helps develop trust and friendships between gossipers (Ellwardt et al., 2012), but that positive gossip can also make targets like and want to affiliate with gossipers, thus serving socializing between gossipers and their targets as well.

The results show that feedback and gossip have distinct effects on self-directed and other-directed emotions, thereby indicating that target's agency appraisals play an important role in shaping their reactions to self-relevant information. Gossip possibly makes people feel that others are responsible for their evaluation, whereas they feel more self-responsible in response to feedback. Although gossip and feedback arouse different patterns of self-directed and other-directed emotions, these emotional reactions triggered by the two types of evaluative information are followed by similar patterns of behavioral intentions, preparing people to repair mistakes, and to retaliate against or affiliate with others. As such, gossip is a social regulation mechanism that parallels formal organizational feedback channels and regulates group members' behavior and interpersonal relations.

The different positive emotions generated by gossip are universally pleasing and can easily co-occur, as was the case in all studies: targets were simultaneously happy with themselves and with gossipers. However, different association patterns are possible for the negative emotions aroused by gossip. On the one hand, gossip targets may exclusively blame the gossipers for their harmful gossiping behavior, categorically rejecting their own faults in order to protect their self-views (Johnson & Connelly, 2014). On the other hand, targets may blame themselves for their shortcomings and blame gossipers for sharing the negative gossip. In Studies

4.1 and 4.2, self-blame and other-blame were not correlated when gossip valence was taken into account, but they were positively correlated in Study 4.3, suggesting that boundary conditions may apply. In Study 4.3 we indeed showed that the arousal of negative self-directed and other-directed emotions depends on self-directed (CSE) and other-directed (CR) dispositional factors, respectively. Furthermore, self-directed and other-directed blame predicted whether gossip targets had prosocial (reparation) or antisocial (retaliation) intentions.

Practical implications

Gossip is omnipresent (Dunbar, 2004) and anyone may become a gossip target at the workplace, where gossip has consequences for the organization, groups and individuals. As our results show, negative gossip can make targets correct their shortcomings, subsequently improving group functioning. However, by complying with gossipers' informal requirements, targets may appear weak, experience reduced power or status, and face future gossip threats. Thus, gossip's normative function entails the danger that by enforcing group norms gossipers abuse targets. Another possibility is that negative gossip targets experience overwhelming blame and see no possibility of correcting their faults, facilitating withdrawal or turnover intentions (Burt, 2008). Furthermore, targets may perceive negative gossip as unjust and intend to harm the gossipers in return. As such, negative gossip may set in motion a spiral of aggression transforming the workplace into a hostile environment (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca, & Ellwardt, 2012), because displaying anger decreases cooperation, elicits reciprocal anger and prompts competitive and retaliatory behavior (Van Kleef & Cote, 2007).

Although gossip can have beneficial effects for groups, organizations often develop strategies to eliminate all workplace gossip (Waddington, 2012). In light of the current results we

propose that instead of banning all gossip, organizational members could become more aware of the beneficial effects of positive performance-related gossip, which strengthens targets' self-confidence and helps them build relationships with coworkers. Furthermore, managers could focus on decreasing malicious gossip, spread with the clear goal of harming colleagues. Implementing a moral code of conduct within organizations, using less competitive incentive structures (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), and communicating organizational goals and planned changes (Mills, 2010) are possible strategies.

Limitations and future research

The present study has some limitations. First, although intentions precede behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), we only measured behavioral intentions, and not actual behavior. To bring higher validity to our findings, future studies could investigate how emotions shape gossip targets' actual behavior.

Second, we examined a limited range of emotional and behavioral responses. Gossip may elicit emotions defined by other appraisal dimensions, such as outcome certainty or action urgency. For example, earlier research has investigated fear responses of people who hear gossip about others (Martinescu et al., 2014). The negative emotions we focused on in the current study, self-directed and other directed blame, may be fundamentally based on fear of losing something valuable: one's self-respect or the respect of other people. Future research may investigate other emotional reactions of gossip targets and their associated behaviors.

Third, our moderators of CSE and CR were measured as stable dispositional factors. However, for higher validity, future research should investigate whether manipulated levels of self-evaluations and reputation concerns lead to similar results. Moreover, we only focused on

moderators for negative emotions. Because the workplace is a social environment where individuals have clearly defined roles and relationships, which are likely to influence gossip targets' emotions and behaviors, other important factors should be included in future research, such as target's relationship with the gossiper, and the hierarchical positions and power levels of the gossiper, recipient and target.

Conclusion

Our study shows that individuals who overhear gossip about themselves experience discrete emotions, defined by gossip valence and agency appraisals. In turn, their emotions influence targets' intentions to repair their self-views or social reputation, and to retaliate against or affiliate with the gossiper. Furthermore, target's prosocial or antisocial behaviors depend on the dispositional factors of CSE and CR which influence arousal of, respectively, self-directed and other-directed negative emotions. In addition, this study shows that gossip and feedback have differential effects on targets' emotions and behavioral intentions. In all, our study provides core insights into emotional and behavioral responses of targets who (unintentionally) overhear gossip about themselves.

Chapter 5

General Discussion

Gossip is a paradoxical social phenomenon: although almost everybody gossips on a daily basis in all social environments, gossip is one of the most widely disapproved behaviors. Recent research has shed some light on the gossip paradox by outlining that gossip is functional for groups: it helps groups maintain cooperation and enforce norms by conveying reputational information (Burt, 2008; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Sommerfeld et al, 2007). Gossip may thus be unpleasant for its targets, but it facilitates group functioning. However, at the individual level, gossip continues to be seen as a socially disapproved behavior (Baumeister et al, 2004; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). This inconsistency between views on gossip at the group and the individual level is puzzling, because gossip cannot play an essential role for groups without fulfilling any meaningful function for the individuals who exchange or are targeted by gossip.

We propose that gossip is omnipresent because it serves important functions for those who engage in it or are affected by it. Gossip entails a complex exchange of reputational information about people in one's environment, which is central to individuals' success of living in that environment (Emler, 1994). As such, individuals are likely to have a unique perspective on the gossip exchange, shaped by their specific role in the gossip process. Therefore, in this dissertation we investigated gossips' functions and mechanisms from the perspectives of the individual sender, receiver, and target of gossip.

In this final chapter we summarize how findings in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 help address the gossip paradox and contribute to research on gossip functionality, and discuss the findings in light of the theories we used for specifying gossip's functions. Afterwards, we make some recommendations about how our research may help individuals and organizations better manage

gossip. Finally, we reflect on the limitations associated with our research and on how future studies may build on this dissertation's findings to further increase our understanding of gossip and its functions for individuals.

Summary of main findings

Gossip is functional for senders. In Chapter 2 we aimed to clarify the functions gossip has for senders, by investigating the connection between individuals' needs and gossip behavior. Specifically, we examined the role of social power for the decision to share gossip. Social power implies asymmetrical access to resources and dependence of the powerless on the powerful, which activates needs for information, influence and bonding (Keltner et al, 2003; Galinsky et al, 2008). Because these needs can potentially be satisfied through gossip, we examined whether people's relative level of power shapes gossip behavior, and whether their needs for information, influence, and social bonding mediate this relation.

The two studies we conducted supported our expectations that people's need for gossiping arises from power differences, and that the powerless gossip more than the powerful. Individuals' needs for information, influence and social bonding mediated the effect of power on spreading negative and positive gossip. Moreover, as social power is relative in nature, gossip behavior was influenced by the power of the gossip receiver: low and high-power people were equally interested in gossiping with high-power receivers, but low-power people were more interested than high-power people in gossiping with low-power receivers in order to gain information, influence or to bond.

In this chapter we showed that gossip is functional for gossipers, and that power differences can explain gossip behavior: power is associated with asymmetrical access to

information, formal means of influence, and central places in social networks. Individuals who lack power need to rely on informal means (i.e. gossip) for addressing their needs. Furthermore, our study showed that high-power people also gossiped with others in order to gain information, influence or to bond, but preferentially with receivers who also have high power, because informally associating themselves with lower-power people can lead to power loss. Importantly, the research presented in Chapter 2 showed that the mechanisms driving negative and positive gossip were similar, suggesting that both types of gossip are functional.

Gossip is functional for receivers. In Chapter 3 we aimed to clarify the functions gossip has for its receivers, by investigating the self-evaluative role of receiving gossip about other people. Specifically, we proposed that individuals need evaluative information about others to evaluate themselves and maintain a positive self-concept (Festinger, 1954; Sedikides & Strube, 1998). We therefore examined whether gossip about others offers receivers social-comparison information that is relevant for self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection, and what the effects of these self-evaluative motives are on self-conscious emotions.

In two studies, we demonstrated that gossip is self-relevant for receivers. Specifically, positive gossip about others had higher self-improvement value than negative gossip, whereas negative gossip about others had higher self-promotion and higher self-protection value than positive gossip. Moreover, the self-promotion and self-protection motives mediated the effect of gossip valence on emotions: receivers of negative gossip about others felt higher pride than receivers of positive gossip due to the self-promotion value of gossip, and higher fear due to the self-protection value of gossip. These relationships suggest that gossip facilitates receivers' self-evaluation.

Furthermore, we examined the moderating role of achievement goals, because they are salient in achievement contexts and regulate emotion, cognition and behavior (Elliott, 2005). People with a mastery goal – defined as a desire to improve one's own performance - perceived marginally higher self-improvement value of gossip and significantly lower self-protection value compared to people with a performance goal – defined as a desire to demonstrate one's superior performance relative to others. Moreover, possibly because they feel threatened by both types of gossip, people with performance goals experienced high self-protection value irrespective of gossip valence. However, for people with mastery goals negative gossip led to higher self-protection concerns and fear compared to positive gossip, because only negative gossip signals threats for them. Achievement goals were not related to self-promotion value of gossip.

These results clearly indicate that gossip has self-evaluative functions for receivers, and generates self-conscious emotions, which may help receivers adapt to their current situation. Furthermore, the self-evaluation process is not only meant to maintain self-concept positivity through self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection, but it is tuned to individuals' goals: receivers' achievement goals may determine, for instance, whether the gossip provides a role-model to follow or a warning about an imminent threat.

Gossip is functional for targets. In Chapter 4, we aimed to investigate the consequences gossip has when it reaches its targets. Specifically, gossip contains information directly relevant for targets' self-evaluation, but also reputational information which affects how others evaluate the target. We used cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) to investigate the complex response pattern of gossip targets, and proposed that responses may be both self-directed and other-directed.

Our studies showed that compared to targets of negative gossip, targets of positive gossip experienced higher self-directed happiness (pride) and other-directed happiness (liking), which positively predicted affiliation intentions. In comparison to positive gossip, negative gossip made targets feel more self-directed blame (guilt and shame), which predicted repair intentions, and other-directed blame (anger), which predicted retaliation intentions. Therefore, on the one hand, targets' reactions to negative gossip may be prosocial, when targets consider themselves blameworthy for the received criticism, or, on the other hand, antisocial when they consider the gossiper blameworthy for damaging their reputation.

To more accurately predict these prosocial or antisocial responses associated with self-directed and other-directed blame, we also examined the moderating role of two dispositional characteristics that reflect individuals' own self-valuation, and the importance they place on how others value them: core-self evaluations (CSE) and concern for reputation (CR). A low CSE strengthened the effect of gossip valence on repair intentions due to self-directed blame. Thus, especially when they had low CSE, people who received negative compared to positive gossip about themselves felt more self-directed blame and subsequently had higher intention to repair their shortcomings. Because people with low CSE do not believe in their abilities to cope with challenges or threats, they are likely to feel that indeed they are wrong and need to correct their behavior. Furthermore, having a high CR strengthened the negative effect of gossip valence on retaliation intentions due to other-directed blame. Thus, especially when they had high CR, people who received negative compared to positive gossip about themselves felt more other-directed blame and subsequently had higher intention to retaliate against the gossiper. A high CR makes people aware of the value of having a good reputation "it is not enough to do good; you

need a reputation for doing good for it to count in your favor" (Nicholson, 2001, p. 42). Because people with high CR are very sensitive to how others perceive them, they are likely to believe that the gossiper has caused them harm and deserves to be punished.

The pattern of response showed by targets of gossip is complex and may cause reactions unintended or unforeseen by the gossiper. People are likely to ignore targets' perspective when they gossip, because the gossip is not intended to reach its targets. However, people have high stakes in gossip about themselves, because gossip affects their self-views and their reputation, which activates strong emotions and motivates prosocial or antisocial behavior. We showed that targets' complex reactions can be understood using a cognitive appraisal framework. That is, gossip valence and agent-causality (i.e., perceptions of the gossiper or themselves as being responsible for the gossip) influence targets' responses to being the subject of gossip in terms of self-blame, other-blame, self-directed happiness, and other-directed happiness. Furthermore, we demonstrated that targets' emotional and behavioral reactions do not only reflect their appraisal of the situation, but also their predispositions in terms of their core self-evaluations and concern for reputation.

Gossip has functions distinct from those of formal communication. In our studies we conceptualized gossip as a unique form of organizational communication, distinct from formal feedback or hierarchical information flow, and characterized by a number of essential traits: evaluative, informal, concealed from targets, subjective, and embedded in context. In two of the chapters presented above we measured formal communication as well as gossip, and we observed notable differences between these types of communication.

First, in Study 2 of Chapter 2, where we investigated how likely people were to gossip positively or negatively as a function of their own and the receivers' power position, we also measured how likely people were to spread a message with the same content using a formal evaluation system. The analyses revealed that sender's and receiver's power had no effect on how formal evaluations were spread, which indicates that individuals use gossip but not formal channels to address their needs generated by power differences.

Second, in Study 2 of Chapter 4 we compared how targets react to gossip and to formal feedback about themselves in terms of self-directed and other-directed emotions, and associated behavioral intentions. People had distinguishable reactions to feedback and gossip about the self. Those who received feedback blamed themselves more and had higher repair intentions than people who received gossip, especially when the information was negative, possibly because formal feedback in organizations is a legitimate and established instrument intended to help the target correct faults, whereas gossip is not. Moreover, targets blamed gossipers more than people who provided feedback, and they were happier with others who provided feedback than with gossipers, suggesting that gossip is more threatening and less constructive for targets; the two types of self-relevant information generated similar self-directed happiness levels.

Taken together, our studies suggest that gossip is a type of communication that circulates in parallel with formal organizational communication, and it has distinctive functions for people who use or encounter it: gossip provides an informal way for people to address their needs, but it is less desirable for targets.

Men and women may use gossip differently. Although we did not set out to investigate gender differences in gossip behavior, we conducted exploratory analyses to test whether men

and women may use gossip differently. Previous research suggests that because women are more interested in social stimuli, more responsive to the social cues and nuances of social relationships, they may have a higher interest in gossip (Pendleton, 1998; Weber & Hertel, 2007). Furthermore, women are more marginalized in society, and are less likely to have access to power positions and their associated resources. Thus, women would more often need to resort to informal means to meet their goals or needs.

Analyses in Chapter 3 indicated that women who imagined receiving gossip about others responded more strongly to the valence of gossip than men. Specifically, women were more alert than men after receiving negative compared to positive gossip about others; women experienced higher self-promotion value of gossip than men after receiving negative compared to positive gossip about others, and subsequently experienced higher feelings of pride due to self-promotion. Furthermore, women experienced higher self-protection concerns than men after receiving negative compared to positive gossip. However, women's fear reactions did not differ depending on gossip valence, whereas men experienced lower fear when they received negative compared to positive gossip about others.

In Chapter 4, we tested whether gender moderated the effect of gossip valence on targets' emotions and behavioral intentions, and discovered that gossip valence effects were stronger on women's emotions: receiving negative compared to positive gossip generated higher self-directed blame for women than for men, and receiving positive compared to negative gossip led to higher self-directed happiness and other-directed happiness for women than for men. Thus, indirect effects of gossip valence on retaliation and affiliation intentions were stronger for women: negative compared to positive gossip generated higher self-directed blame and

subsequently higher repair intentions for women than for men; positive compared to negative gossip generated higher other-directed happiness and subsequently higher affiliation intentions for women than for men.

Received gossip about others or about the self induced stronger self-evaluations and emotions among women than men, possibly because women are more relational and interdependent than men and respond therefore more strongly to gossip, which is relational in nature (Weber & Hertel, 2007). However, in both Chapters 3 and 4 this pattern of results was stronger in the scenario studies than in the critical incident studies, in which participants recalled actual gossip they encountered. Thus, it is plausible that women react with more intense emotions to imaginary gossip situations than men, whereas women and men do not differ much in their emotional responses to real-life gossip situations, suggesting that people's meta-stereotypes about gossip and emotionality influence their reactions to imagined and real gossip incidents.

Theoretical contributions

Gossip is a prevalent phenomenon in all kinds of social contexts because it facilitates group functioning by effectively securing the collaboration of group members, as documented by studies in evolutionary psychology (e.g. Dunbar et al, 1997; McAndrew et al, 2007), social psychology (e.g. Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011) or economic game theory (e.g. Sommerfeld et al, 2007). Considering gossip from an individual perspective, our work complements previous research by showing that gossip is functional for the individuals involved in the gossip triad. We demonstrated that gossip helps people better adapt to their social environment in a way that is sensitive to their personal needs and predispositions. Gossip senders use gossip as an informal

way of addressing needs activated by power differences, receivers use gossip as an indirect way to evaluate themselves, and targets use gossip as an indicator of their self-worth and public image. Furthermore, in line with previous research portraying gossip as a fundamental human behavior, prevalent across social contexts (e.g. Dunbar, 2004), our studies showed that gossip is easy to elicit, recall, or imagine. Gossip seems to be a universally adaptive and a versatile human behavior, because it has clear functions for all the social actors it involves.

In the current work we not only contribute to gossip research, but we also connect gossip to major social psychological theories. We used a number of important psychological theories in conceptualizing the effect of gossip on senders, receivers, and targets. In Chapter 2, we connect gossip research with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and social power theories (Keltner, et al, 2003; Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Magee & Smith, 2013), by showing that individuals' fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and social connectedness, which are likely to be activated by power dynamics, affect gossip behavior. Our results suggest that although low power brings people at a disadvantage, the powerless can overcome limitations associated with their position by gaining some informal control through gossip. Furthermore, in line with previous research, we found that low power people pay more attention to high power people than vice-versa. Our study is among the first to investigate mechanisms through which the powerless attend to the powerful. Specifically, our research shows that powerless people use informal gossip channels to actively cope with their disadvantageous dependence on higher-power people for resources, by striving to gain information from them, to influence or to befriend them.

In Chapter 3, we translated the SCENT model (Sedikides & Strube, 1997) into motives for valuating gossip about others, which is relevant for receivers for self-evaluative purposes (Wert & Salovey, 2004). The SCENT model postulates that individuals are motivated to engage in self-evaluation processes that will lead to self-concept positivity, "but the individual does not necessarily attempt to achieve this objective through brute self-aggrandization" (Sedikides & Strube, 1997, p. 225). Instead, individuals most often evaluate themselves in ways that are subtle and sensitive to pressures of the social context. Gossip can serve as such a subtle manner through which people engage in social comparison processes to tactically self-evaluate and maintain self-concept positivity. Moreover, our results suggest that social comparison processes and self-evaluation can be triggered and activated externally, by people who share gossip about others with the receiver. As such, tactical self-enhancement of one's self-image is a flexible process, because it is not only triggered by deliberate, self-initiated behaviors like seeking feedback, but also by spontaneous incidents like receiving gossip. Thus, people are able to tactically collect social cues from their environment through gossip and adapt their self-views accordingly.

In Chapter 4, we contribute to cognitive appraisal theory of emotion by showing that gossip targets' complex emotional and behavioral responses can be understood in this framework. Our results suggest that the primary reaction of gossip targets is emotional, but also that these emotions are in line with targets' appraisals of message valence (positive *vs*. negative) and responsibility for generating the gossip (self *vs*. other). Because gossip is extremely important and relevant for targets, as it concerns their self-image and their public image, a dynamic process of cognitions and emotions seems to underlie targets' reactions to gossip. It was

beyond the scope of our research to investigate the exact nature of these emotion-cognition dynamics, but this may be an interesting question for future research.

Our work shows that gossip is a complex social mechanism, simultaneously activating different motives and functions for its senders, receivers, and targets. For each actor in the gossip triad there are parallel mediation chains driving gossip behavior or reactions to gossip. Specifically, people spread gossip to address their needs for information, influence and social bonding generated by social power differences, receivers were interested in gossip due to its value for self-evaluation in terms of self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection, and targets reacted to being the subject of gossip because of its potential impact on their private self-view as well as their public reputation. As such, the current work may be among the first empirical studies to portray gossip as a social mechanism that is multi-functional and multi-final (helps achieve different outcomes simultaneously) for all the actors it involves.

Although it sometimes has destructive effects, we believe that gossip is not intrinsically harmful: "gossip is like eating: excessive eating is harmful, but that does not imply an intrinsic evil in eating" (Michelson et al, 2010, p. 384). In the current work we address gossip from an individual functional perspective, independent from moralizations of gossip behavior. We showed that gossip is meaningful and functional for all the individual actors involved in the gossip triad; furthermore, each actor's perspective is unique and fundamentally subjective, because it is shaped by individuals' specific needs, motives, interests, and traits. As such, each actor's perception of gossip is likely to be shaped by their place in the gossip triad: sender, receiver and target.

Because gossip is subjective and shared privately, it also associates with potential downsides and risks. Gossip is a complex social mechanism, personally relevant to all the actors it involves, and for each person in the gossip triad different intrinsic and situational factors shape the transmission and reception of gossip. As such, the framing and meaning of a gossip message is likely to change at every step in the chain of gossip transmission from senders to receivers and occasionally to targets, in the sense that the intentions of gossip senders may not correspond to how receivers and targets understand the gossip message. For example, someone may share a negative impression about a colleague's behavior in order to gain more information about the target and verify whether one's opinion is accurate, the receiver may feel proud due to the self-promotion value of the gossip, and the target may be angered by the negative gossip and intend to retaliate against the gossiper. Therefore, gossip's effects may be unpredictable or potentially dangerous, because gossip is bound to be spread and perceived from a subjective perspective.

Practical contributions

People are inclined to think that gossip is bad, that it should be prevented or controlled in the workplace, and to say that they personally avoid it. The negative consensus about gossip is related with the threats gossip poses for the reputations of its targets, receivers, and senders, as well as potential threats for the general leve of trust between group members. However, gossip is present in all social contexts due to the wide range of functions it fulfills for groups and individuals. As Patricia Spacks noted "perfect silence, perfect solitude, would violate the human condition" (1985, p. 31), suggesting that it would be virtually impossible to create a social environment without gossip. The findings presented in this dissertation are aligned with recent research showing that gossip is essential for the functioning of individuals and the groups they

are part of (e.g. Beersma & van Kleef, 2011; 2012; Feinberg et al, 2012; , Sommerfeld et al, 2007) . We showed that gossip helps senders address their needs, it helps receivers self-evaluate, and it helps targets interact with their social environment. Therefore, we can offer individuals and organizations some recommendations regarding the use of gossip.

Because gossip is highly functional for the individuals involved in it, there is little to gain from demonizing or trying to ban gossip. Gossip is something that people who share a collective identity do naturally, in all social environments, including the workplace (Nicholson, 2001), and work satisfaction is directly related to the opportunities a job provides to talk (Emler, 1994). A more constructive approach is for both individuals and organizations to accept gossip as a given of their social environment, and to reflect more systematically on its functions and implications.

Members of the gossip triad. First, our findings may help senders, receivers and targets understand that gossip spreading is functional, and that people engage in gossip in order to fulfill their current needs. As shown in Chapter 2, people with lower power gossiped to seek information, to exert influence, or to bond with others more than those with higher power. Reflecting on the motives behind their gossip behavior may help gossipers become aware of their needs and how to best address them. Furthermore, our research may help receivers and targets understand that gossip is not inherently malicious (Baumeister et al, 2004; Ben'Ze-ev, 1994) and it is unlikely to be spread in order to hurt, manipulate, or deceive them. Moreover, people may even learn to identify the rare occasions when gossip is used for malicious purposes, for example when gossipers have high levels of psychopathy, narcissism or Machiavellianism (Lyons & Hughes, 2015). Purposefully spreading false or harmful gossip is risky for gossipers, because it is unlikely to be believed and it can be traced back to the sender (De Backer & Gurven, 2006),

and as such may harm the moral identities or moral reputation of gossipers. Thus, understanding that gossip is functional may contribute to a less negative view of gossip.

Second, our research helps clarify that people are avid receivers of gossip because gossip provides them with input for self-evaluation, as shown in Chapter 3. Gossip helps receivers draw social comparisons between themselves and gossip targets, and become aware of ways to improve themselves, potential dangers and threats they need to protect themselves from, or their qualities and accomplishments relative to the targets'. Moreover, our studies may help receivers understand that gossip is subjective and delivered in a way that serves the senders' needs, and may not describe reality very accurately. Gossip is spread in private, and is not easily verifiable; thus, people who rely exclusively on gossip may oversample information they share with fellow gossipers and draw biased conclusions (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Third, our research may help senders and receivers of gossip anticipate the effect their behavior will have on targets. Gossip targets are the ones who may suffer the most negative consequences of gossip (at least, from negative gossip), because gossip shapes others' opinions about targets, but is concealed from targets. Thus, gossip targets have limited control over their own reputation. As such, gossip can lead to victimization, or distress in the form of emotional exhaustion and burnout among targets (Georganta, Panagopoulou, & Montgomery, 2014). As shown in Chapter 4, negative gossip targets experience self-directed blame, and subsequently develop repair intentions. However, gossip that is particularly negative or that is repeatedly spread about targets, might reduce targets' well-being and their ability to repair their faults. Furthermore, targets who experience other-directed blame may engage in disproportionately aggressive retaliatory behaviors that disrupt relationships between co-workers and organizational

processes. Moreover, people who are very frequently the target of negative or positive gossip may become overly preoccupied with how they are perceived, to the detriment of their core activities and tasks in the workplace.

In sum, for each actor in the gossip triad the first step in coping with gossip would be to analyze their own perspective, and compare whether the way they use or understand gossip corresponds to the other actors' in terms of intentions or consequences. We believe that even minimal perspective taking may help individuals counteract important negative effects of gossip, because it would help gossip triad members anticipate their actions' effects on each other. Furthermore, perspective taking would help targets understand that negative gossip is not always meant to harm them, which may prevent them from overworking to repair their shortcomings or engaging in antisocial behavior by retaliating against gossipers.

Organizations. Our research may help organizations understand that instead of completely fighting against gossip or denying its existence, they should be open to learning about gossip that is circulated. Although gossip is subjective, most gossip reported by participants in our critical incident and experimental studies was true or believed to be true; false or malicious gossip was rather exceptional. As such, because gossip might represent a signal about problematic issues or changes in one's environment, we would advise organizations to consider the potential personal or situational circumstances that have generated the gossip and the reactions to it.

The current research may help managers recognize the underlying mechanisms of gossip and the needs their employees are fulfilling through gossip. Furthermore, managers may create working environments where people need to rely less on gossip for fulfilling fundamental needs,

and where gossip is less threatening. For example, people who feel they do not receive enough information or have too little control over their work environment may engage in gossip spreading. As such, gossip may be a signal that communication and employee autonomy need improvement. Furthermore, receivers may be interested in gossip to make social comparisons and evaluate their own standing, which may be better achieved by more formal evaluations. As shown in this dissertation, formal evaluations are also more legitimate and trigger less other-directed emotions by targets. Moreover, targets are more likely to be victimized when gossipers intend to harm them. Malicious motives for gossip may arise more readily in a competitive climate, where people need to demonstrate they are superior to others in order to succeed. Thus, managers may work towards changing the climate, for example by implementing less competitive incentive structures.

A survey revealed that, although gossip is omnipresent in the workplace, 94% of the companies included had no policy for managing the grapevine, and managers had no control over information circulating through informal channels (Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998). Leaders should recognize gossip's potential as a communication and a social control mechanism, but one that is highly related to and dependent on the needs of individuals who exchange gossip. Specifically, knowledge of the functions of gossip may be integrated in management development programs, training managers to make sense of gossip and utilize it in constructive ways. As proposed above, our research could help managers prevent gossip from escalating and damaging employees' well-being or the functioning of the organization, by adjusting the level of information and control employees receive in their work, decreasing competitive incentives and goals, and making feedback more available. Furthermore, human-resource specialists could use

our research to design tools that inform employees about the functions and potential negative effects of gossip, and offer them support in coping with gossip. By trying to reconcile caveats and benefits associated with gossip, organizations may be able to find a balanced state in which gossip is functional and constructive, and develop the means to intervene before gossip becomes dysfunctional and destructive.

Limitations and future research

In the current work, with the exception of Chapter 2, Study 2, we investigated gossip from the three perspectives of the gossip triad actors independently of each other, whereas the three perspectives are likely to be interconnected. Interpersonal relations and social dynamics between the members of the gossip triad are an important factor which we did not include in our current studies. However, to better understand how gossip is spread and received by individuals, future research should explicitly take into account how the relational nature of gossip shapes its functions. Important questions that future research may address are whether perceived similarity, rivalry, the nature or qualities of the relation between members of the gossip triad affect the functions they derive from gossip, or to what extent and under what conditions the intention of the gossiper is accurately understood by receivers and targets.

Our work helps outline major functions of gossip for the individuals in the gossip triad. As such, the current work represents a first step in understanding that gossip is functional for individuals because it expresses their needs and motivations; however, our research does not offer a comprehensive account of how gossip's functions are activated. Future studies should explore other gossip functions than the ones we addressed here, and the mechanisms driving these functions. For example, an important motive often mentioned in the gossip literature is fun-

seeking (e.g. Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). In line with the idea of American comedian Will Rogers "everything is funnier when it's happening to the other guy" (in J. Morreall, 1994, p. 60), new research could explore the connection between gossip and humor.

In the current work we identified situational achievement goals, and the individual differences of core self-evaluations and concern for reputation as moderators of the gossip functions for senders, receivers and targets. Future research should focus on identifying other factors that facilitate or hinder the expression of gossip functions. Because other needs and motives salient for individuals in different contexts are likely to shape gossip behavior and to activate functions of gossip, it remains for future research to explore how other situational factors and predispositions shape the functions senders, receivers and targets derive from gossip.

Furthermore, in the three empirical chapters presented in this dissertation we focused on gossip's functions for individuals in a work context. However, we believe that our findings and their implications may be transferrable to other contexts, because the social mechanisms driving gossip's functions are likely to come into play in many other contexts where social interactions are frequent: education, sports or recreational activities, one's family or circle of friends. Moreover, the way gossip is spread and received may depend on how important a specific context is to someone, how much time they spend there and possibly on other situational contingencies. Future studies should address these questions.

Our studies outline the functions of gossip for individuals, and are complementary to previous research documenting the group-serving functions of gossip. In line with the multilevel selection theory of gossip (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005) we believe that the individual and group level functions of gossip are interrelated. Gossip's group-serving functions are latent and may

come into play because individuals are personally interested in gossip due to the functions it serves them. Although gossip offers clear advantages to members of groups, gossip's group protection potential is likely to be too abstract for individuals, who might have difficulties visualizing the group perspective beyond their immediate needs and interests. As such, by helping individuals address needs and motives that are personally relevant to them, gossip might enable people to engage in group-serving behaviors. Future research should study the link between the functions gossip serves for individuals and groups, by investigating how individuals address group-level problems by translating them into issues that are personally relevant for them.

Conclusion

The studies presented in this dissertation demonstrate that gossip is functional for individuals. Informal communication in the form of gossip is self-relevant for all the individuals involved in it, addressing their needs and motives in a way in which formal communication cannot: "stories, myths, gossip, and jokes […] may represent attempts to humanize the impersonal spaces of bureaucratic organizations, to mark them as human territory. […] When much of the information traded in organizations is symbolically and emotionally impoverished, […] stories, jokes and gossip re-introduce a symbolically charged narrative to everyday life in organizations. Many organizations are not generally pleasant places in which to live or work. They place several restrictions on the individual's rights and freedoms and allow little room for those aspects of the human soul which are not directly relevant to the organizational objectives. Emotions, spontaneity and play are largely disenfranchised as is, in any meaningful sense, the

pursuit of pleasure and happiness. […]. These myths are efforts to deal with life's harshness, unpredictability, arbitrariness" (Gabriel, 1991, p. 873).

Our work offers at least a partial answer to the gossip paradox: although socially disapproved due to its potential negative effects, gossip is ubiquitous because it is self-relevant and functional for all the individuals involved in it. We contribute to the increasing body of research demonstrating that gossip is a sign of healthy social functioning for groups and individuals. Specifically, through its functions, gossip helps senders, receivers and targets interact better with their social environment. As such, for each of the individuals involved, gossip represents an opportunity to learn about themselves and about others, and to respond adaptively to their environment, in a way that accommodates their needs, motives, interests and predispositions. Gossip is a versatile behavior: it can function both as an exchange of observations about people in one's environment, which is central to the success of living in that environment, and also as a way to manipulate other's reputations for self-serving purposes (Emler, 1994). Gossip is functional for the people in the gossip triad, and it may be used both as an instrument of adaptation, as well as an instrument of destruction. Thus, we advise a cautious but humane view of gossip in organizations.

Appendix A

Distribution of participants across experimental conditions in Study 2.2

Condition		Total *N*	*N* Male	*N* Female
1	PG: high; PR: high; PT: high	24	16	8
2	PG: high: PR: low: PT: high	26	13	12
3	PG: low; PR: high; PT: high	37	19	16
4	PG: low; PR: low; PT: high	19	5	12
5	PG: high; PR: high; PT: low	35	18	16
6	PG: high; PR: low; PT: low	26	18	7
7	PG: low; PR: high; PT: low	23	13	10
8	PG: low; PR: low; PT: low	20	11	8
Total		210	113	89

Note: PG = power gossiper; PR = power receiver; PT = power target

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Nederlandse samenvatting

Roddels – informele, evaluerende gesprekken die gevoerd worden over een derde, afwezige, partij (e.g., Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004) – komen voor in alle sociale omgevingen, waaronder de werkomgeving, en hebben vaak een negatieve bijklank. Eerder onderzoek naar roddelen heeft zich vooral gericht op de sociale controlefunctie van roddelen binnen groepen, zoals het communiceren van groepsnormen en het straffen van normovertreders (Grosser et al., 2010), het beschermen van groepsgenoten tegen uitbuitend gedrag van anderen (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012), en het ontwikkelen van sociale contacten (Dunbar, 2004). Deze focus op de sociale controlefunctie van roddelen impliceert dat de rol van individuele doelen nog niet op een systematische manier onderzocht is. Ieder individu heeft echter zijn/haar eigen interesses en behoeftes met betrekking tot roddelen (Nevo et al., 1994, p. 181). Onze propositie is daarom dat roddelen zo alom aanwezig is omdat het belangrijke individuele behoeftes vervult voor degene die roddelt, voor degene die de roddel aanhoort, en voor degene over wie wordt geroddeld. Roddelen behelst complexe uitwisseling van reputatiegevoelige informatie en is belangrijk voor individuen om effectief te kunnen opereren in hun sociale omgeving (Emler, 1994). Omdat de betrokken individuen in het roddelproces verschillende rollen vervullen, is het waarschijnlijk dat zij elk vanuit een uniek perspectief handelen. In deze dissertatie onderzoeken we daarom de functies van roddelen vanuit het perspectief van de individuele zender van roddel, de ontvanger, en het doelwit (degene over wie het gaat).

Roddelen is functioneel voor de zenders. Het doel van hoofdstuk 2 is om duidelijk te maken wat de functies zijn van roddelen voor de zenders, door te onderzoeken wat de connectie is tussen individuele behoeftes en roddelgedrag. Specifiek onderzoeken we de rol van sociale macht in het delen van roddels. Sociale macht impliceert een asymmetrische toegang tot informatie, en een afhankelijkheid van de machtelozen ten opzichte van machtigen. Dit activeert

een behoeft aan informatie, invloed en het creëren van sociale connecties bij de machtelozen (Keltner et al., 2003; Galinsky et al., 2008). Omdat deze behoeftes mogelijk kunnen worden vervuld door roddelen, onderzoeken we of het relatieve machtsniveau van mensen invloed heeft op roddelgedrag, en of de behoefte aan informatie, invloed en sociale connecties deze relatie medieert.

In dit hoofdstuk laten we zien dat machtsverschillen roddelgedrag kunnen verklaren: macht wordt geassocieerd met asymmetrische toegang tot informatie, formele manieren van invloed uitoefenen, en centrale plaatsen in sociale netwerken. Individuen die weinig macht hebben roddelen meer dan individuen met meer macht, omdat ze zich moeten beroepen op informele manieren (roddelen) om hun behoefte aan informatie, invloed en sociale connecties te vervullen. Ten tweede laat de studie zien dat mensen met meer macht wel roddelen om informatie, invloed of sociale connecties te verkrijgen, maar vooral met ontvangers die ook veel macht hebben, omdat de informele associatie met machtelozen kan leiden tot het verliezen van macht. Het onderzoek van hoofdstuk 2 toont tevens aan dat de mechanismes achter zowel positieve als negatieve roddels hetzelfde zijn, wat suggereert dat beide typen roddels functioneel zijn voor individuen met relatief weinig macht.

Roddelen is functioneel voor de ontvangers. Het doel van hoofdstuk 3 is functies van roddelen voor de ontvangers te identificeren, door onderzoek te doen naar de zelf-evaluatieve rol van het ontvangen van roddels over anderen. Specifiek is onze propositie dat individuen behoefte hebben aan informatie over anderen om zo zichzelf te evalueren en een positief zelfconcept te behouden (Festinger, 1954; Sedikides & Strube, 1998). We testen daarom of roddels over anderen voor ontvangers als sociaal-vergelijkingsmateriaal kan dienen. De idee is dat ontvangers

de sociale vergelijkingsinformatie kunnen gebruiken voor het verbeteren van zelf-relevante vaardigheden (zelfverbeteringsmotief), voor het verbeteren van het zelfbeeld (zelfpromotiemotief), en voor het verdedigen tegen potentiele bedreigingen (zelfbeschermingsmotief). Verder beargumenteren we dat het gebruik van roddels voor zelfevaluatie kan leiden tot zelfbewuste emoties, waarbij we specifiek de effecten van zelfevaluatiemotieven (zelfverbetering, zelfpromotie, zelfbescherming) op de discrete emoties trots en angst onderzoeken.

In twee studies tonen we aan dat roddelen relevant is voor ontvangers. Positieve roddels over anderen hebben een hogere zelfverbeteringswaarde dan negatieve roddels, terwijl negatieve roddels een hogere zelfpromotie- en zelfverdedigingswaarde hebben dan positieve roddels. Daarnaast mediëren het zelfpromotiemotief en het zelfbeschermingsmotief de effecten van roddelvalentie op emoties: ontvangers van negatieve roddels voelen meer trots dan ontvangers van positieve roddels, door de zelfpromotiewaarde, en ze voelen meer angst door de zelfbeschermingswaarde van roddels. Ook zien mensen met een 'leerdoel' (een verlangen tot het ontwikkelen van competentie) marginaal meer zelfverbeteringswaarde in ontvangen roddelinformatie, en minder zelfbeschermingswaarde vergeleken met mensen met een 'prestatiedoel' (een verlangen tot het demonstreren van competentie). Verder ervaren mensen met prestatiedoelen een hoge zelfbeschermingswaarde, onafhankelijk van roddelvalentie. Voor mensen met leerdoelen leiden negatieve roddels tot hogere zelfbeschermingszorgen en angst, vergeleken met positieve roddels, want alleen negatieve roddels signaleren een bedreiging voor hen.

De resultaten tonen aan dat roddelen een zelf-evaluatieve functie heeft voor ontvangers, en zelfbewuste emoties zoals angst en trots stimuleert die ontvangers helpen bij de aanpassing aan hun huidige situatie. Verder is het zelfevaluatieproces niet alleen functioneel om een positief zelfbeeld te behouden door zelfverbetering, zelfpromotie en zelfbescherming, maar is het ook gevoelig voor individuele doelen.

Roddelen is functioneel voor de doelwitten. Hoewel het meestal niet de bedoeling is dat roddels het doelwit bereiken, gebeurt dat soms toch. Het doel van hoofdstuk 4 is om te onderzoeken wat de consequenties van roddels zijn wanneer deze het doelwit bereiken. Roddels bevatten informatie die direct relevant is voor de zelfevaluatie van het doelwit, maar ook reputatie-informatie die beïnvloedt hoe anderen het doelwit evalueren. We gebruiken "cognitive appraisal" theorie van emoties (Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) om de complexe reactiepatronen van roddeldoelwitten te onderzoeken, en argumenteren dat reacties zowel gericht kunnen zijn op de zelf als de ander.

Onze studies laten zien dat doelwitten van positieve roddels, in vergelijking met doelwitten van negatieve roddels, meer op zichzelf gerichte blijdschap (trots) en op anderen gerichte blijdschap (de ander leuk vinden) voelen, en dat dit een positieve voorspeller is voor intenties tot affiliatie. Vergeleken met positieve roddels, zorgen negatieve roddels vaker voor gevoelens van schuld (en schaamte), wat een voorspeller is voor intenties tot het herstellen van eigen tekortkomingen, maar ook voor gevoelens van boosheid op anderen (de roddelaars), wat vervolgens intenties tot vergelding oproept. In het bijzonder wanneer men de eigen identiteit en capaciteiten negatief evalueerde (i.e., lage zelfevaluaties), voelden doelwitten van negatieve roddels (vergeleken met positieve roddels) meer geïnternaliseerde schuld, waardoor zij

vervolgens een hogere intentie tot reparatie van eigen tekortkomingen ontwikkelden. Maar bij een sterke gerichtheid op de eigen sociale reputatie, voelden de doelwitten van negatieve roddels (vergeleken met positieve roddels) vooral boosheid jegens de anderen, wat vervolgens leidde tot sterkere intenties tot vergelding tegen de roddelaar.

We toonden dat de complexe reacties van doelwitten van roddels begrepen kunnen worden met behulp van een "cognitive appraisal" raamwerk. Dat wil zeggen dat de mate waarin het doelwit van roddel denkt dat hij- of zijzelf verantwoordelijk is voor de roddels, van invloed is op diens reacties wat betreft de toekenning van de schuld aan de roddels (zelf versus anderen) en de daarbij behorende emoties als schaamte (jegens zichzelf), blijdschap (over zichzelf en anderen) en woede (jegens de roddelaar). Ook hebben we laten zien dat de emotionele reacties en gedragingen van doelwitten niet alleen hun beoordeling van de situatie reflecteren, maar ook de kern van hun eigenwaarde en de mate waarin ze bezig zijn met hun reputatie.

Roddelen heeft unieke functies ten opzichte van formele communicatie. In onze studies conceptualiseren we roddelen als een unieke vorm van communicatie in organisaties, anders dan formele communicatie zoals georganiseerde feedback of hiërarchische informatie-uitwisseling. In twee hoofdstukken vonden we belangrijke verschillen tussen roddelen en formele communicatie.

In hoofdstuk 2 ontdekten we dat de macht van zenders en ontvangers geen invloed had op de manier waarop formele feedback van doelwitten werd verspreid, terwijl machtsverschillen wel effecten sorteerden op verspreiding van roddels. Blijkbaar verkiezen individuen roddel boven formele communicatiemiddelen om door machtsverschillen gegenereerde behoeften te adresseren. In hoofdstuk 4 ontdekten we vervolgens dat mensen anders reageerden op feedback

dan op roddels over zichzelf: degenen die feedback ontvingen legden de schuld bij zichzelf en hadden sterker de intentie tot reparatie dan degenen die roddels ontvingen, in het bijzonder wanneer het negatieve informatie betrof. Ook namen doelwitten van roddel de roddelaars de verspreiding van de roddel meer kwalijk dan dat de doelwitten van feedback de zenders van feedback kwalijk namen, en waren de ontvangers van feedback gelukkiger met degenen die feedback gaven dan dat de ontvangers van roddel gelukkig waren met de personen die over hen roddelden.

We concluderen dat roddelen een vorm van communicatie is die parallel loopt aan formele communicatie binnen organisaties, en dat het unieke functies heeft voor mensen die erbij betrokken zijn: roddels geven op een informele manier informatie die voorziet in bepaalde behoeften, hoewel roddel minder gunstig kan uitpakken voor het doelwit.

Mannen en vrouwen roddelen verschillend. Voorgaand onderzoek suggereert dat vrouwen, vergeleken met mannen, meer geïnteresseerd zijn in sociale stimuli, dat ze sneller reageren op sociale signalen en op de nuances van interpersoonlijke relaties, en dat ze daarom een grotere interesse hebben in roddels (Pendleton, 1998; Weber & Hertel, 2007). Ook spelen vrouwen op veel plekken in de samenleving een meer marginale rol, waardoor zij minder toegang hebben tot machtsposities en de daarbij behorende bronnen. Daarom zouden vrouwen in sterkere mate afhankelijk zijn van informele middelen om hun doelen te bereiken of aan hun behoeften te voldoen.

Analyses in hoofdstuk 3 wijzen uit dat vrouwen die zich inbeelden roddels over anderen te ontvangen vervolgens sterker reageren op de roddelvalentie (positieve *vs* negatieve roddel) dan mannen. In hoofdstuk 4 toetsten we of geslacht een modererend effect had op de relatie

tussen de roddelvalentie en de emoties en gedragsintenties van de ontvanger, en we ontdekten dat de roddelvalentie een sterker effect had op de emoties van vrouwen dan op die van mannen. Echter, in zowel hoofdstuk 3 als 4 reageerden vrouwen sterker op roddels in de scenariostudies (waarin participanten zich inleefden in denkbeeldige roddelsituaties) maar niet in de kritische-incidentenstudies waarin participanten daadwerkelijk beleefde roddelsituaties uit hun geheugen opriepen. Deze uitkomsten suggereren dat de verschillen in emoties en gedrag tussen mannen en vrouwen zich vooral voordoen in denkbeeldige roddelsituaties en zich minder openbaren in 'echte' roddelsituaties, en derhalve vermoedelijk een weerslag zijn van aan roddel gerelateerde stereotypen.

Conclusies. De studies in deze dissertatie demonstreren dat roddelen zelfrelevant en functioneel is voor alle betrokken individuen: de zender, de ontvanger, en het doelwit van de roddels. Daarmee dragen we bij aan de groeiende stroom van onderzoeken waaruit blijkt dat roddelen een gezond onderdeel is van het sociale functioneren van groepen en individuen. Voor alle betrokken individuen biedt roddelen de mogelijkheid om te leren over zichzelf en anderen, en om zich aan te passen aan de omgeving op een manier die bijdraagt aan de eigen behoeften, motieven en interesses. Roddelen is functioneel voor alle mensen in de roddeldriehoek, en het kan door iemand gebruikt worden zich om zich aan te passen aan zijn sociale omgeving.

Roddelen heeft vaak een negatieve connotatie omdat het destructieve effecten kan hebben op de reputatie van het doelwit en op het onderlinge vertrouwen tussen de mensen van een groep. Ons onderzoek helpt individuen en organisaties te begrijpen waarom roddelen zoveel voorkomt en wat de functies en consequenties van roddelen zijn voor zenders, ontvangers en slachtoffers

zijn. Een beter begrip van roddel kan ertoe bijdragen dat de gunstige effecten van roddelen worden behouden terwijl destructieve roddel wordt tegengegaan.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I am grateful to my supervisors, Onne and Bernard, for guiding me through my PhD studies. Onne, thank you for believing in me and for being supportive from before our collaboration officially started. As a master student I came to you a week before the application deadline for the PhD programme, with a vague idea about the research I wanted to do. In just a few days we wrote a successful research proposal, which we have since transformed into a dissertation. I remember that at the beginning you made the effort to check if your supervisory style matched my working style. One time after you sent me a draft with a lot of comments and corrections you stopped by to ask if I'm comfortable with my text being slayed like that. I understood then that I'm lucky to have a caring supervisor, whose primary aims are to guide me in doing high quality research, but also to make sure that I arrive in one piece at the end of this long process.

Bernard, thank you for joining as a supervisor on my PhD project. Throughout these years I had much to learn from your way of making complicated things look simple by cutting through to the core of problems – usually with a graph or a table! I would like to thank you in particular for one piece of advice you gave me. It was the first year of my project, and we were working out the first sets of results. Our original hypotheses weren't supported, and I was very disappointed. I remember you telling me this: the most important predictor of success for a PhD project is your motivation, and not whether your data is perfect. That conversation gave me a lot of confidence in the work I did, and the energy to continue, explore, and take risks.

This project was challenging at times because none of us knew precisely how to do research on gossip. However, that was not going to be a setback for us. I am grateful to you both for bringing in your expertise, critical thinking, and openness to a new research area, and for providing me with constructive feedback. In addition, I thank you, Onne and Bernard, for always making me feel that you have my best interest at heart, beyond the research output.

Next I would like to say a big thank you to Roxy Foxy, my friend, office-mate, and sometimes colleague in suffering. I cannot describe in just a few words how happy I am to have spent these years together with you. We shared our experiences as PhD students, our food, a bit of gossip (only for science though ☺), and many many silly moments, which to me have been very entertaining and necessary distractions.

Acknowledgements

Furthermore, I would like to thank my colleagues at the HRM & OB department, who have made me feel very welcome here. You have helped me without hesitation each time I turned to you with a question or request. I have enjoyed our many activities, lunches, coffee breaks, outings and borrels! Tineke, thank you for being there and for helping me solve all sorts of problems throughout the years, which sometimes seemed bureaucratic or personal riddles. Frederik, thank you for being a fun colleague and a great listener, and for accepting the role of paranymph!

I have very much enjoyed my life in Groningen, and that is thanks to my great network of friends. They have filled my life with so many precious moments! From the beginning I felt blessed to be part of many groups of friends and communities: the international students of Plutolaan, my peers from the research master, the diverse members of Nothing Left To Do But Drink and the girls of Girls Just Wanna have Fun (I am so happy to have met you Catriona, Irena, Maeva, and Simone!!! – and please not that you are in alphabetical order here ☺), my fellow PhD students at FEB, the Romanians of Groningen (thank you Bighi and Elena), the people at STHH, the Deep Focus Film Club, and the Couchsurfing Cooking Club. Wow, 6 years in Groningen is a lifetime in any other place!

I am also very grateful to my friends back home, who make me feel like time and distance are superfluous concepts. Every time we meet we pick up right where we left off! Silviu, thank you for the 10 years we spent (growing up) together, and for the inspiration and motivation you gave me in pursuing a PhD.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for your love, patience and wisdom. I feel blessed to have your support in all my choices!